Managing school attendance

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Under the provisions of section 16AB of the *Audit Act 1994*, I transmit my performance audit report on *Managing school attendance.*

Yours faithfully

JW CAMERON
Auditor-General

8 December 2004

Foreword

Poor attendance at school can have an irreversible impact on the absent student. Students who regularly miss days of school miss valuable opportunities for education that often cannot be retrieved. Absenteeism also impacts on the learning of other students, as it can disrupt the teacher's ability to deliver lessons in a sequential and organised way.

Regularly attending school is an important aspect of a child's social development. Completing assignments, regularly attending class and building connections to the school environment help to chart a lifelong course of responsibility and commitment to oneself and to others. If young people fail to develop these habits while they are at school, when will they learn them?

School attendance management practices are crucial to minimising absences from school. Schools need to quickly identify absences, follow-up promptly, and send a clear message to parents and students that "it is not OK to be away".

Schools also need to gather and review accurate information about the incidence and reasons for absence so that they can implement appropriate strategies to improve attendance.

This report considers the effectiveness of attendance management practices in schools.

Schools and the Department of Education and Training do give a high priority to reducing student absenteeism. However, challenges remain. Schools need to develop prompt, timely and effective follow-up processes to minimise the number of unexplained and unapproved absences. Better use can be made of available information about the reasons for absence to develop a more complete picture of the causes of absenteeism.

The report also highlights the need for stronger partnerships between schools, parents and the local community in reducing the growing levels of school absenteeism.

JW CAMERON
Auditor-General

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1. Executive summary

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1.1   Introduction

Attending school regularly is a critical factor in student success, and poor attendance can have lifelong consequences for students. Students who are regularly absent from school are at the greatest risk of dropping out of school early, becoming long-term unemployed, being caught in the poverty trap, depending on welfare and being involved in the justice system.

Sound management of student attendance is one of the most important measures for minimising student absenteeism. This includes ensuring that students and their parents are aware of attendance requirements, following-up promptly and consistently on absences, and reinforcing the message that "it is not OK to be away" when students are absent without good reason. It also includes gathering good information on trends in absence and on the reasons for absence, so that emerging issues can be identified, and strategies to address the causes of absence from school can be developed and evaluated to see if they are making a difference.

This audit considers how effective these attendance management practices in schools are, and whether the Department of Education and Training (DET) and schools have clear and rigorous processes in place, which form the foundation for effective student attendance management. While the audit found that key initiatives implemented by DET whose aims include minimising student absenteeism are soundly based, the lack of available evaluative data meant that we were unable to conclude whether these strategies have been effective from the perspective of student attendance.

1.2   Conclusion

The audit found that while schools and DET place considerable focus and attention on addressing school absenteeism, weaknesses in current attendance management practices mean that it is difficult for schools to know whether these efforts are effective.

Further attention needs to be paid to the following areas:
- Developing consistent, effective follow-up processes in schools for unexplained and unapproved absences.
- Developing a more complete and accurate picture of student absenteeism based on rigorous and comprehensive information at a state and school level. This should take into account not only the incidence, but also the reasons for absence, and levels of unapproved and unexplained absences.

- Schools need to build stronger partnerships to support student attendance with parents and the local community, including greater involvement of school councils.
- Schools need to better utilise the potential of the Computerised Administrative Systems Environment in Schools (CASES21) for understanding and managing student absence by improving user skills.

Improvements in these areas will significantly enhance the capacity of both schools and DET to better understand and address the rising trend in student absenteeism.

1.3   Are DET's arrangements for managing absenteeism effective?

DET's policy on student attendance for government schools, including the associated *Student Attendance Guidelines*, largely reinforces and clarifies the responsibilities of parents and schools as prescribed within legislation. However, the guidelines need to be updated to include recent changes to the relevant legislation.

The Registered Schools Board (RSB) requires non-government schools to establish processes to regularly monitor student attendance/absentee patterns, but does not adequately articulate the standards for managing student absences in those schools. While not specifically required to do so under the Act, developing minimum standards for student attendance in registered schools would clarify the roles and responsibilities of school staff and parents in supporting student attendance.

Absence measures currently used to classify government schools to a review category are inadequate for identifying those schools with problem attendance management practices.

The school review process is a valuable tool for investigating and developing solutions to school performance problems. However, where attendance issues are part of the scope of a review, diagnostic review methods do not always detect ineffective attendance management practices within schools. The processes for managing student attendance within schools (e.g. timeliness of follow-up of unexplained absences, local monitoring of attendance data and community engagement efforts) can have a significant impact on a school's student absence outcomes. For this reason, we consider that they should be subject to closer and more rigorous examination when exploring how a school can improve its performance in terms of reducing student absence.

The fact that enrolment auditors do not verify that the basis upon which schools approve absences is consistent with DET policy and the Community Services Act, means that some schools may be receiving funding for some students whose absences should not have been approved.

The lack of any centrally collected absence statistics from registered non-government schools, coupled with the fact that these schools are reviewed only once every 6 years by the RSB, means that present monitoring arrangements do not permit an understanding of the extent to which registered non-government schools are effectively managing student attendance/absences.

Recommendations

1. **That DET revise the *Student Attendance Guidelines* to ensure that the document is accurate and up-to-date.**

2. **That the RSB clearly communicate standards for managing student absences in non-government schools.**

3. **That DET revise the school review process in relation to issues of student absence, to ensure that:**
   - **unexplained/unapproved absences are taken into account in classifying schools to a review category**
   - **diagnostic reviewers examine the timeliness of school follow-up practices, numbers of unexplained/unapproved absences and the effectiveness of internal school attendance management procedures when examining issues of poor performance on student absence.**

4. **That DET ensure that the basis upon which student absences are approved by schools for funding purposes is checked by enrolment auditors to assess whether they are consistent with legislation and departmental policy.**

5. **That the RSB implement reporting by registered non-government schools on student attendance rates in annual returns.**

RESPONSE provided by Secretary, Department of Education and Training

Recommendation 1

The Department accepts this recommendation. The Department is currently reviewing education and training legislation and plans to review the Student Attendance Guidelines at the completion of this review in December 2005.

Recommendation 3

DET partially accepts this recommendation. The terms of reference for school reviews identify the major issues which need to be addressed to improve the school's performance and student outcomes. The terms of reference are developed by the school, DET regional office and the reviewer. Where student absence has been identified as a major issue for a school in the terms of reference for the review then reviewers will investigate that school's attendance policies and processes. It does not make sense, however, for reviewers to focus on these policies and processes if school attendance is not a major issue in the school being reviewed.

Recommendation 4

The recommendation is accepted and will be implemented in 2005 as part of the risk-based enrolment verification arrangements already in place.

RESPONSE provided by the Registered Schools Board

Recommendation 2 and 5

The Registered Schools Board accepts these recommendations. These issues have also been raised in the recent review of the Board.

1.4   Is school-level attendance management effective?

The overwhelming majority of schools monitor student attendance each day in accordance with DET's policy. Many schools exceed DET's minimum standards for monitoring, and monitor attendance on a class-by-class basis. This means that they are well placed to identify the early signs of attendance problems.

The ways in which schools follow-up unexplained absences vary considerably. So, too, do their approaches to dealing with problem attendance. While schools must be flexible in dealing with individual students, it is important that their approaches at different stages of the process are underpinned by a good understanding of the recommended, available options. A small number of schools feel that they have exhausted their options for dealing with students with attendance problems before they have implemented all of the options outlined in the *Student Attendance Guidelines*. Lack of awareness of the guidelines and associated processes for follow-up is a factor in this. Inadequate follow-up of unexplained absences means that parents may not be aware that their children are absent from school, and that some schools are not conveying a clear message to parents that regular attendance matters.

Both schools and parents share responsibility for resolving unexplained absences. Delays or failure to communicate on the part of some parents clearly impact on the school's ability to resolve this issue. Further attention needs to focus on ways that contact with parents can be improved.

Absences due to parent choice are recorded by schools as "approved", even though the underlying reason may not be consistent with the definition of "reasonable excuse" as defined by law. This situation is problematic as it means that schools may not be identifying and following-up invalid excuses offered by parents, and the powers available under legislation to deal with extreme cases of parent-sanctioned unapproved absence appear to be little used.

A significant number of school councils have not discharged their responsibility to develop local policies on student attendance. This suggests that school leadership teams need to better engage school councils on the issue of student attendance. Increasing the awareness and involvement of school councils is an important first step in building wider community involvement in attendance management.

Most schools have only an anecdotal understanding of the reasons for student absences. Although many schools analyse and report on student attendance to school management regularly, these analyses do not usually involve a rigorous examination of CASES21 data on both unexplained absences and the reasons for absence in the school. Lack of skills in using CASES21 is a factor in this.

Most strategies implemented by schools to reduce absenteeism have a broad focus and are not usually underpinned by an analysis of the reasons for absence. We consider that for as long as schools remain unable to fully understand the root causes underlying specific absenteeism issues, they run the risk of implementing what may be blunt strategies, whose effectiveness cannot be assured.

Recommendations

6. **That DET provide training and assistance to schools to implement timely, effective and efficient follow-up processes.**

7. **That DET, in consultation with schools, develop and implement appropriate strategies to increase parental awareness/engagement on student attendance issues.**

8. **That school management teams, in conjunction with their councils, effectively discharge their responsibility to develop local policies on student attendance as required, and that DET monitor school compliance in this area.**

9. **That DET clearly identify and communicate to schools the processes and procedures for managing unexplained and long-term absences that should be included within school policies.**

10. **That DET provide professional development to schools to improve proficiency in utilising the reporting capability of CASES21 to inform targeted strategy development and review.**

RESPONSE provided by Secretary, Department of Education and Training

Recommendation 6

The Department accepts this recommendation. A range of options for the provision of support to schools will be considered in addition to that provided already by the regional offices. Options to be considered will include on-line professional development, train the trainer program and dissemination of approaches to follow-up processes being used by schools via the Department's Knowledge Bank.

Recommendation 7

The Department accepts this recommendation. Appropriate strategies will be developed as part of the project to develop support to schools to assist follow-up of student absence.

RESPONSE provided by Secretary, Department of Education and Training - continued

Recommendation 8 and 9

The Department accepts these recommendations. An improved school accountability and improvement framework is currently being developed with schools. This framework is, in part, designed to better inform and assist schools to meet their compliance responsibilities. The framework will also improve the Department's monitoring of compliance by schools and their councils with a range of policies. The compliance module is expected to be implemented in the second half of 2005.

It is intended that the compliance module will include links to processes and procedures for better managing student absence.

Recommendation 10

Roll-out of the administrative modules of CASES21 to all schools was completed in August 2004.

Training in the use of this new version of CASES21 has been and continues to be provided. As with implementation of any new program or system a post-implementation review will be undertaken – this review will include a review of training provision.

1.5   Are systems for managing attendance data in schools effective?

DET's data standards for classifying and recording reasons for student absences need further work. Absence codes included in CASES21 are not all mutually exclusive and do not adequately distinguish between approved and unapproved absences. This situation undermines the collection of consistent and accurate information on the reasons for student absences by schools.

CASES21 has many useful features for managing student attendance. However, teachers cannot utilise its electronic roll marking (ERM) features in the classroom and there is no facility to import data from third-party ERM products. This creates significant barriers for schools in making the most of its potential. As a result, schools have become overly dependent on manual, time consuming and less efficient methods for recording attendance data. The excessive time spent on data entry could be better spent on value adding tasks such as following-up with parents on reasons for absence.

In many schools, limited user skills also prevent full utilisation of the potential benefits of CASES21.

Recommendations

11. That DET undertake a review of the adequacy of existing absence codes and revise them where appropriate so that they:

- **are mutually exclusive**
- **adequately identify all major forms of absenteeism**
- **distinguish between approved/unapproved absences.**

12. That DET take action to enable the import of data from third-party ERM products into CASES21 so as to reduce the reliance of schools on inefficient, manual data handling processes.

13. That DET review the current arrangements for the delivery of training/professional development to schools on the utilisation of CASES21 for managing student absenteeism, and take action to improve the skill-level of users in this area.

RESPONSE provided by Secretary, Department of Education and Training

Recommendation 11

This recommendation is partially accepted. DET already periodically reviews the absence codes and will continue to do so. The current codes are intended to provide flexibility to schools to record reasons for absence at the level and type of detail they require. The codes at an individual level could be seen as not mutually exclusive but their hierarchy enables the reasons to be aggregated into mutually exclusive categories for analysis.

Recommendation 12 and 13

Roll-out of the administrative modules of CASES21 to all schools was completed in August 2004.

Training in the use of this new version of CASES21 has been and continues to be provided. As with implementation of any new program or system a post-implementation review will be undertaken – this review will include a review of training provision.

1.6   Are statewide and regional attendance initiatives soundly based?

DET produces a comprehensive range of reports on student absence that are used extensively by regions as a basis for working collaboratively with schools to identify issues and improve school performance.

However, while these reports describe trends in the overall incidence of student absence, they do not give insight into the underlying reasons. Nor do they identify the level of specific forms of absenteeism or levels of unexplained and unapproved absences. As this information is crucial for the purpose of developing targeted strategies, its omission from DET reports represents a gap in DET's analysis and reporting framework that should be addressed.

DET has developed a number of initiatives in recent years that should improve student attendance. Some directly address student absenteeism, and others address the underlying causes, (for example, by improving student performance, enhancing student wellbeing and taking innovative approaches to delivering the school curriculum).

Notwithstanding the recent initiatives, the lack of any formal evaluation of the impact that these initiatives have had on student attendance means that we are unable to conclude if these strategies have been effective from this perspective. Given the upward trend in statewide absence rates observed in recent years, we believe that DET should direct efforts to examining the impact of its initiatives on attendance as a priority.

Recommendations

14.   **That DET collate and analyse data on the reasons for student absences recorded by government schools, so as to report on the incidence of specific forms of absenteeism, including levels of unexplained and unapproved student absences.**

15.   **That DET evaluate and report on the effectiveness of its implemented initiatives with respect to student attendance.**

RESPONSE provided by Secretary, Department of Education and Training

Recommendation 14

As noted in the Auditor-General's report DET has initiated a project to determine and report the underlying reasons for student absence. The results of this project will be reported early in 2005. DET will continue to collate and analyse these data annually to monitor trends in the reasons for student absence.

Recommendation 15

The recommendation is accepted. An evaluation of the Access to Excellence initiative will be completed this year. Evaluations of the Schools for Innovation and Excellence initiative and the Managed Individual Pathways program are scheduled for 2005.

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2. Student absenteeism

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2.1   The importance of attending school

Regular school attendance is a critical factor in student success. For learning to take place, students have to be at school, in class and paying attention. Students who regularly miss days of school also miss valuable opportunities for education that often cannot be regained.

Students receive the full benefit of classroom instruction only when they attend on a regular basis. That is, regular school attendance fosters a child's social development as well as their academic growth. By regularly attending school - completing assignments, and building strong connections with teachers and other students - students learn about responsibility and commitment to themselves and to others. These are among life's most valuable lessons.

In 1996, the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training noted the long-term effects on young people's lives of educational disadvantage. In its report, *Truancy and Exclusion from School*, the committee pointed to results from the *Australian Longitudinal Survey 1991*[1]. These results showed that (compared with young people who have completed Year 12 or its equivalent) early school leavers were:

- 2 and a half times more likely to be unemployed
- 2 to 4 times more likely to be in low-skilled or unskilled jobs
- 5 to 6 times more likely to be neither in the labour force nor undertaking study – perhaps doing nothing at all
- twice as likely to come from a low socioeconomic background[2].

Students who regularly miss school are at greatest risk of dropping-out of school early, becoming long-term unemployed, being homeless, being caught in the poverty trap, depending on welfare and being involved in the justice system[3].

Absence from school clearly affects the absent student, but can also affect students who attend regularly. High absenteeism rates for a class or school can disrupt a teacher's ability to plan and present class work in a sequential and organised way. This can affect the progress of all students in the class, not only those missing, and can make the class hard to manage.

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[1] Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 1994, *National Strategy for Equity in Schooling*, p. 5.

[2] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1996, *Truancy and Exclusion from School*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, p. 3.

[3] Ibid.

2.2   Student absenteeism and its causes

Educators and the community are concerned about students whose absences are prolonged and unapproved. These students are at greatest risk of disconnecting from the school environment and of experiencing the negative social outcomes listed in section 2.1 of this report.

For this reason, much of the research on student absenteeism has focused on developing a better understanding of the different forms and causes of unapproved absences. This research shows that different types of absenteeism call for different types of interventions[4].

2.2.1 Forms of student absenteeism

The *Truancy and Exclusion from School* report identifies the major forms of student absenteeism as:

- truancy
- school refusal
- school withdrawal
- early leaving.

Truancy is described as the "persistent, habitual and unexplained absence from school of a child of compulsory school age, although it can occur with parental knowledge and sometimes consent". This may also take the form of fractional truancy, where students arrive late, leave early or skip individual classes.

School refusal is absence by children who refuse to attend school even in the face of persuasion and punishment from parents, and of possible school discipline. This form of absenteeism is widely recognised as a disorder involving persistent non-attendance at school, excessive anxiety and physical complaints.

School withdrawal is absence by children whose parents keep them away from school on a regular or long-term basis, for reasons related to the needs and priorities of the parent. This group also includes children who have not been enrolled at school by their parents.

Early leaving refers to absence by children under 15 who drop out of school before completing their compulsory schooling.

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[4] Hume/Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) and Inner Northern LLEN 2004, *Tackling Student Absenteeism – Research Findings and Recommendations for Schools and Local Communities*, report prepared by Glenn Bond, Hume/Whittlesea LLEN and Inner Northern LLEN, Victoria, p. 8.

2.2.2 Causes of student absenteeism

The causes of student absenteeism are complex and often interrelated. A recent review of the literature[5] identified 2 types of factors - family and personal factors, and school factors – that contribute to absenteeism.

Family and personal factors include:

- transience, mobility and homelessness
- geographic isolation
- low parental valuing of, or interest in, education
- low socioeconomic status
- unemployment
- illness and attention deficit disorders
- a culture that does not value schooling, or gives higher priority to other activities
- substance misuse
- abuse of, or by, family members.

School factors usually relate to students' experiences of the school environment. School factors include:

- dislike of subjects
- boredom with schoolwork
- irrelevant or restrictive curriculum
- inadequate relations between a student and their teacher
- learning difficulties
- inadequate school support and welfare
- inflexible school structure
- inadequate peer relations
- being bullied, threatened or involved in fights.

These characteristics, or experiences, have also been identified by other studies as contributing to students dropping out and becoming disconnected from school[6].

Students may experience more than one of these family and personal factors; and they may also experience one or more of the school factors. As the factors increase, so does the likelihood of the student being absent.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Victorian Statewide School Attachment and Engagement Planning & Interest Group 2001, *Home and Away: A Literature Review of School Absenteeism and Non-Engagement Issues*, report prepared by Susan Wheatley and Geoff Spillane, Victorian Statewide School Attachment and Engagement Planning & Interest Group, Victoria.

The way that the school manages attendance issues, including the timeliness and consistency of follow-up of absences, is also a powerful influence on rates of unapproved absence from school. Schools that act quickly and consistently - which contact parents immediately a child is absent - send strong messages that they won't stand for truancy[7].

Students undertaking research for class assignments.

[7] Social Exclusion Unit, United Kingdom Cabinet Office 1998, *Truancy and School Exclusion*, Cabinet Office, London, chapter 1, p. 3.

2.3   Student absenteeism in Victoria

Government schools in Victoria use the Computerised Administrative Systems Environment in Schools (CASES21) to record absenteeism and classify the reasons for absence. While our audit identified some limitations on the reliability of published absence rates, the data provides some insight into trends in student absenteeism in Victoria.

2.3.1 Absence rates

Figure 2A shows the distribution of the average number of days of absence per student, by year level, across all Victorian government schools in 2002[8]. For each of the year levels shown, 25 per cent of schools have absence rates above the 75th percentile and 25 per cent below the 25th percentile. This means that in 2002, 25 per cent of Victorian government schools had an absence rate greater than 24.05 days per student in Year 9.

FIGURE 2A: MEAN ABSENT DAYS PER STUDENT BY YEAR LEVEL IN 2002

	Prep	Yr 1	Yr 2	Yr 3	Yr 4	Yr 5	Yr 6	Yr 7	Yr 8	Yr 9	Yr 10	Yr 11	Yr 12
75th percentile	16.00	15.00	14.19	14.00	14.00	14.38	15.10	17.83	21.00	24.05	22.71	18.00	15.18
Mean	13.44	12.93	12.34	12.11	12.16	12.53	13.03	14.82	18.27	20.54	19.01	14.78	12.20
25th percentile	10.80	11.00	10.03	10.00	10.00	10.20	10.50	12.66	14.85	16.50	15.42	11.09	8.11

Source: Department of Education and Training.

These figures show that absence rates are fairly consistent in the primary years (Prep to Year 6). However, absenteeism is a significant issue during the middle years of schooling with absence rates peaking at an average of 20.54 days per student in Year 9. This is the same as missing 10 per cent of the school year, or half a day every week.

From Year 9, attendance rates generally improve. As students reach the age where schooling is no longer compulsory, those with the worst attendance records often drop out.

2.3.2 Trends in absence rates

Figure 2B shows that absence rates during the middle years of schooling increased between 1996-2002. The largest increase was for Year 5 students, for whom the average number of absent days per student grew by 44.2 per cent during the period. The other year levels also had substantial increases in absence rates.

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[8] 2003 data was unavailable at the time of writing this report.

FIGURE 2B: MEAN ABSENT DAYS PER STUDENT FOR YEARS 5-9

Year	Yr 5	Yr 6	Yr 7	Yr 8	Yr 9
1996	8.69	11.16	11.97	15.87	17.17
1997	10.09	10.46	13.1	16.1	18.18
1998	11.06	11.81	14.22	16.96	18.46
1999	11.05	11.77	14.06	17.21	18.64
2000	11.67	12.39	14.12	17.64	19.68
2001	11.44	12.10	14.52	18.08	20.47
2002	12.53	13.03	14.82	18.27	20.54
% change, 1996-2002	44.2%	16.8%	23.8%	15.1%	19.6%

Note: DET has some doubts about the reliability of its published 1996 student absence figures. While absence figures published in recent years are based on data collected from almost all schools, figures from 1996 were calculated using a sample-based approach. DET's comments regarding this data are presented at the end of Section 2.

Source: Department of Education and Training.

Figure 2C shows the trend for 1996-2002 in student absence from all Victorian government primary and secondary schools, and for all schools combined. While absence rates for all government schools grew by 16.6 per cent, the rate of growth of primary school absences was double that of secondary schools, and more than one and a half times that of all schools.

FIGURE 2C: MEAN ABSENT DAYS PER STUDENT BY SCHOOL TYPE

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	% change 1996-2002
Average days of absence per student, Prep-Year 6	9.96	10.74	10.73	11.36	12.02	11.72	12.65	27.0
Average days of absence per student, Year 7-12	14.89	14.80	14.00	15.74	16.13	16.69	16.80	12.8
Average days of absence per student, Prep – Year 12	12.23	12.61	12.03	12.86	13.66	13.56	14.26	16.6

Source: Department of Education and Training.

2.3.3 Regional absence rates

Figure 2D shows that absence rates increased in most Department of Education and Training (DET) regions between 2000 and 2002.

The Gippsland Region (with an average of 15.35 days of absence per student in 2002) had the greatest increase, and the highest absence rate. In 2002, 3 of the 4 metropolitan regions also had above-average absence rates: Northern (15.18 days per student), Western (15.14 days per student) and Southern (14.64 days per student). Of the 5 non-metropolitan regions, only one other region beside Gippsland had an above average rate (Central Highlands Wimmera, with 14.53 days per student) in 2002.

FIGURE 2D: AVERAGE DAYS OF ABSENCE PER STUDENT (PREP TO YEAR 12), BY REGION
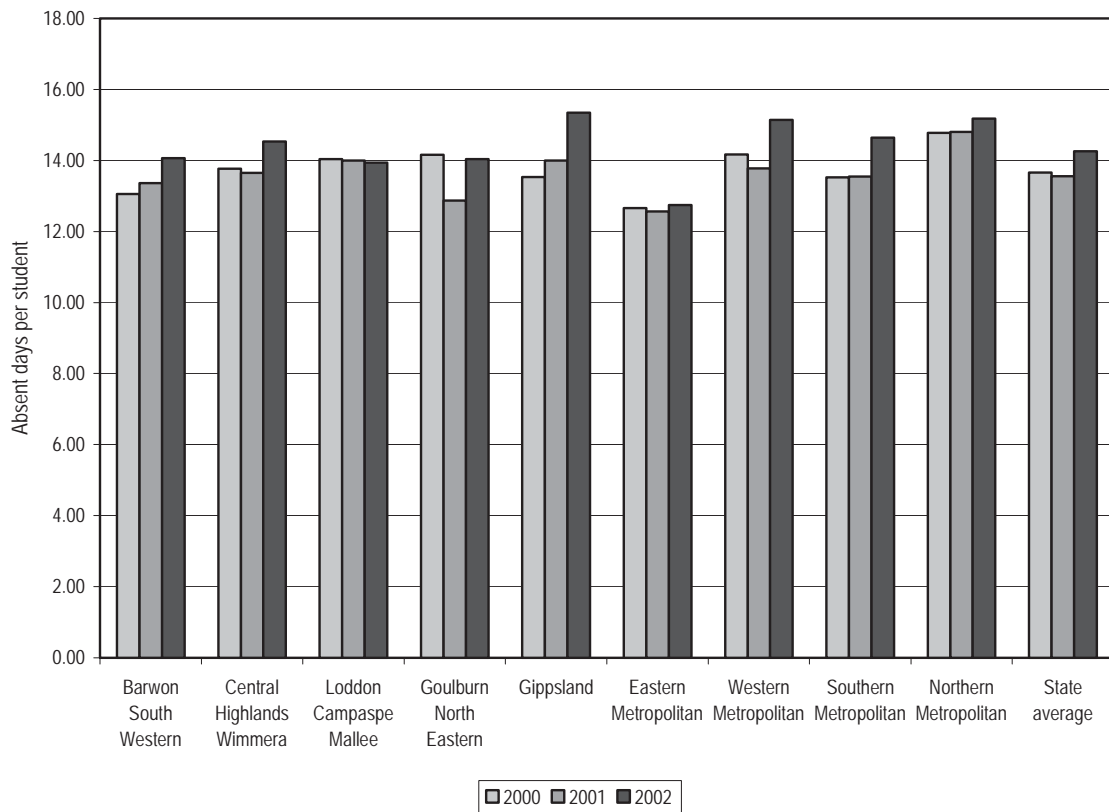
Source: Department of Education and Training.

2.3.4 International comparisons

According to a 1995 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) study, Australia had one of the highest rates of absenteeism by Year 8 students of any OECD country (7 per cent).

Australia ranked equal third worst behind Scotland (8 per cent) and the Czech Republic (8 per cent). The OECD average was about 5 per cent of Year 8 students absent on a typical day for any reason in 1995[9].

[9] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2001, *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2001*, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris, pp. 239-41.

2.4   Legislation for student attendance

The *Community Services Act 1970, Education Act 1958* and *Child Employment Act 2003* provide the legislative framework for attendance at school by young Victorians.

The Community Services Act requires parents of school age children to ensure that their children attend a state school on each "school half-day"[10] of each week, unless they have a reasonable excuse not to do so, or unless a child has been excused from non-attendance by an order of the minister. Under the Act, reasonable excuses are:

- being under efficient and regular instruction in some other way (such as home education or attendance at a registered non-government school)
- an illness that prevents attendance
- doing a distance education program
- having an exemption from school attendance from the minister.

In Victoria, schools should only approve student absences if parents can provide a reasonable excuse as defined by the Act[11].

The Act also provides for the appointment of summoning officers to summon parents for an infringement of the attendance requirements.

The Education Act permits work experience arrangements for students aged 14 and over for up to 10 days each term (i.e. up to 40 days each school year).

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[10] A school half-day is defined as 2 hours before noon and 2 hours after noon.

[11] Department of Education and Training 1997, *Student Attendance Guidelines 1997,* Department of Education and Training, Victoria, p. 9.

The Education Act establishes the Registered Schools Board (RSB) as the body responsible for registering and regulating non-government schools in Victoria. Under the Act, registered schools are required to record student attendances on each half-day in an attendance register approved by the board. A register must be kept at the school and be available for inspection at all times by any person authorised by the minister. The Act also provides penalties for registered schools which fail to mark attendance registers, or which refuse to make them available for inspection.

The Act also describes the circumstances in which the minister can exempt a child from attendance. These are that:

- the child's parents are ill or are experiencing severe hardship
- a medical practitioner has recommended treatment that would prevent the child from attending school (if the child is at least 12)
- it is in the child's interests to be exempted from attending school.

The Child Employment Act states that a child cannot be employed during school hours on a school day unless the minister has granted that child an exemption. It also states that a parent or guardian must not let the child go to work if that work will limit the child's attendance at school or their capacity to benefit from school.

2.5   Conduct of the audit

Our audit examined how effectively schools and DET are monitoring student attendance, identifying the reasons for student absence and implementing strategies designed to reduce student absenteeism.

The audit considered 4 key questions:

- are DET's arrangements for managing absenteeism adequate?
- is school-level attendance management effective?
- are systems for managing attendance data in schools effective?
- are statewide and regional attendance initiatives soundly based?

2.5.1 Methodology

To conduct this audit, we examined the attendance record keeping, analysis and follow-up procedures of a randomly selected sample of 120 government primary and secondary schools across Victoria. We also interviewed key staff and examined supporting documents.

The sample was stratified by school type (i.e. primary or secondary), location (i.e. metropolitan or non-metropolitan) and school size (i.e. big or small). The results from our survey were then post-weighted to ensure that they are representative of Victorian state primary and secondary schools (excluding special schools and language schools).

Statistically, this approach permits us to generalise the results from our survey to the broader population of Victorian state primary and secondary schools with a margin of error of +/- 8.6 per cent at the 95 per cent level of confidence[12].

We also examined the policy and procedural framework for school attendance established by DET and the RSB, including their own internal data collection, analysis and school compliance monitoring processes. We examined documents and interviewed staff in DET's central office, the Western Metropolitan Region and Gippsland Region.

We also consulted the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, the Catholic Education Office, representatives of the Victorian Primary Principals Association, the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, the Australian Education Union and Parents Victoria.

The audit was performed in accordance with the Australian auditing standards applicable to performance audits and, accordingly, included such tests and procedures considered necessary.

Assistance to the audit team

Mr Barrie Fenby, provided specialist assistance and advice to the audit steering committee. He has a long association with Victorian education as a teacher, curriculum developer, text book author, administrator and as a school reviewer, and has also been involved in student absence through his work as a principal consultant and manager of school support centres.

Educational Development and Review, Melbourne University Private, and Educational Evaluators Australia Pty Ltd assisted with audit fieldwork.

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[12] This margin of error corresponds to estimates for all schools. Margins of error for estimates corresponding to primary and secondary schools are +/- 12.3 per cent and +/- 11.3 per cent respectively, at a 95 per cent level of confidence.

RESPONSE provided by the Secretary, Department of Education and Training

DET has concerns about the reliability of the sample of schools on which the 1996 data in Figure 2B is based. After adjusting the time series for this, it would appear that student absence has generally increased by around 20 per cent. The department is of the view that this increase mainly reflects improvements by schools in their efforts to better record student attendance. In addition improvements to the student management systems and processes have assisted in improving the reliability of the data each year. Increases in student absence are of major concern to the department. There is some suggestion that community attitudes about student absence have changed, particularly for family holidays, student birthdays and other purposes. Initiatives like the "It's not OK to be away" project in Gippsland appear to be having some early success in changing these attitudes. Departmental initiatives like the Middle Years program are also helping to reduce the rate of increase in student absence in Years 7 and 8.

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3. Are DET's arrangements for managing absenteeism adequate?

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3.1   How effective are DET's policies on student attendance?

3.1.1 Criteria

In assessing whether DET's policies on student attendance are effective, we examined key documents describing the procedures and requirements for schools in relation to managing attendance, to determine whether:

• there were guidelines about the standards to be applied and procedures to be followed for managing attendance in schools

• those guidelines were consistent with legislation.

3.1.2 Policies applicable to government schools

The *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*[1] contains the major policies for government schools. Each year, DET gives schools the latest policy advice and guidelines on a wide range of operational and administrative matters.

DET's policy on student attendance for 2004 provides clear statements of procedures and requirements relating to the:

• admission of students to government schools

• enrolment of students subject to successful admission

• transfer of students between schools

• transition of students (i.e. from primary to secondary schools, or from school to employment or further education)

• promotion and retention of students

• attendance of students at school

• granting of an exemption from school attendance

• monitoring of student attendance.

DET's policy on student attendance incorporates the *Student Attendance Guidelines* that were developed in 1997[2]. These guidelines reinforce the requirements of government schools and clarify the role and responsibilities of schools for managing student attendance.

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[1] Department of Education and Training 2004, *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, Department of Education and Training, Victoria.

[2] Department of Education and Training 1997, *Student Attendance Guidelines 1997*, Department of Education Training, Victoria.

The guidelines outline procedures for supporting students with attendance issues. They also acknowledge the importance of a whole school approach, partnerships with parents, as well as formal and informal links with locally-based agencies.

The guidelines identify the resources available both inside and outside DET for supporting schools and students with attendance issues. They also highlight the importance of interagency cooperation and a joined-up government approach to successfully managing student attendance.

DET's policy for government schools is linked to sections of the *Community Services Act 1970*, *Education Act 1958* and *Child Employment Act 2003* that cover student attendance. However, the appendixes to the attendance guidelines are out-of-date. They refer to legislation that has either been repealed or changed since the guidelines were first issued in 1997.

Victorian government primary school.

3.1.3 Absenteeism policies for non-government schools

The Education Act provides for the establishment of a Registered Schools Board (RSB), to:

- register, and where appropriate, revise the registration of non-government schools and maintain a register of non-government schools
- monitor the compliance of non-government schools with the Act and with the RSB regulations.

Section 47 of the Act requires registered schools to record student attendance on each half-day using an attendance register approved by the RSB. These registers must be kept in the school and be available for inspection by any person authorised by the minister at all times.

The RSB requires schools to maintain attendance records in accordance with the Act and establish procedures to regularly monitor student attendance/absentee patterns.

We found that the RSB has not developed a formal policy governing the support and maintenance of student attendance at non-government schools, including procedures for follow-up of unexplained absences. While not specifically required to do so under the Act, developing minimum standards for student attendance in registered schools would clarify the roles and responsibilities of school staff and parents in supporting student attendance.

This issue was also noted by the recently published review of the RSB. The steering committee for this review recommended that the RSB develop minimum standards for the welfare of students, giving particular attention to student attendance[3].

3.1.4 Conclusion

DET's policy on student attendance for government schools, including the associated *Student Attendance Guidelines*, largely reinforces and clarifies the responsibilities of parents and schools as prescribed within legislation. However, the guidelines need to be updated to include recent changes to the relevant legislation.

The RSB requires non-government schools to establish processes to regularly monitor student attendance/absentee patterns, but does not adequately articulate the standards for managing student absences in those schools.

Recommendations

1.   **That DET revise the *Student Attendance Guidelines* to ensure that the document is accurate and up-to-date.**

2.   **That the RSB clearly communicate standards for managing student absences in non-government schools.**

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[3] Steering Committee, Review of the Registered Schools 2004, *Review of the Registered Schools Board*, Steering Committee, Review of the Registered Schools Board, Melbourne.

3.2   Does DET adequately monitor school compliance with attendance policies?

3.2.1 Criteria

In assessing whether DET adequately monitors school compliance with attendance policies, we examined whether monitoring processes:

- adequately assess the effectiveness of internal school procedures for managing student attendance
- adequately identify the extent of school compliance with departmental policies on attendance
- accurately identify schools with student attendance problems.

3.2.2 Monitoring of government schools

Student attendance in government schools is normally assessed annually. DET uses data collected from schools to produce a School Level Report[4]. This contains performance statistics that compare individual school absence rates with broader state benchmarks.

Each school's performance on these measures is also considered as part of the more detailed school review process.

School review process

Government schools are subject to a detailed school review process once every 3 years[5]. The review process forms part of an integrated planning, development, reporting and review framework to assist schools in monitoring and continuously improving their performance. It examines school performance against both stated school goals and DET's policy objectives, as described in each school's charter[6].

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[4] The School Level Report contains school-level performance statistics across a range of datasets, of which student absence is one.

[5] DET may also initiate an "out-of-cycle review" if annual performance against key datasets points to issues requiring urgent attention. This decision will normally be made in consultation with the region.

[6] The school charter is a formal understanding between the school, the principal and DET. It identifies the goals and priorities adopted by the school to meet government, community and parent expectations, and to improve student learning outcomes for the next 3 years. Recommendations arising from the school review are taken into account when developing the next school charter.

In 2004, DET implemented a differential review process whereby schools were allocated to one of the following 3 major review categories:

- *negotiated reviews* – schools with performance outcomes significantly above expected levels
- *continuous improvement reviews* – schools with satisfactory performance but scope for improvement
- *diagnostic reviews* – schools where some performance outcomes are significantly below expected levels.

Prior to a school review, the School Level Report and the school's self-assessment report[7] are examined. The categorisation of schools to a review category occurs via a 2-step process. At the first step, performance against student absence benchmarks is one of several key datasets used by DET for allocating schools to one of the 3 review categories. The datasets used at this stage include:

- student achievement measures (e.g. Assessment of Reading P-2[8], AIM[9], teacher judgments against the CSF[10], VCE)
- staff morale measures
- parent satisfaction measures
- student absence measures.

At the second step, regional offices consider the results of that analysis together with their local knowledge to determine the final review category. To assess if schools are continuously improving, 4 years of data are used with a particular focus on trends.

Student absence benchmarks describe the average number of absent days per student by year level, that is, the incidence of student absence at the school. They do not identify how many of those absences are either unexplained or unapproved, or absences due to suspension. The number of absences which are unexplained or unapproved can act as a valuable indicator of the effectiveness of a school's processes for managing student attendance.

As student absence statistics do not include this information, this means that schools with average (or better) performance against statewide benchmarks, but with weak attendance management processes, can avoid the diagnostic review process.

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[7] The first phase of the review process is the preparation by the school of a school self-assessment, which aims to identify the achievements of the school, performance trends emerging from the school's data and recommendations for the new school charter.

[8] Per cent of Year 2 students reading level 20 with an accuracy of greater than, or equal to, 90 per cent.

[9] The Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) is a statewide assessment program conducted each year for students in Years 3, 5 and 9.

[10] The Curriculum and Standards Framework (CSF) describes what students should know and be able to do in 8 key areas of learning at regular intervals from the Preparatory year to Year 10.

Conduct of school reviews

Where poor performance against student absence benchmarks has led to a school undergoing a diagnostic review, the reasons for that poor performance are investigated.

Reviewers are normally external to DET and are trained and accredited by DET to conduct reviews. When exploring issues surrounding poor performance, reviewers are guided by terms of reference prepared by the regional director in consultation with both schools and reviewers[11]. If one of the triggers for the school review was poor student attendance, then reviewers will explore the causes of absence as part of the review.

We found that in most cases, where attendance is in the scope of a school review, reviewers adopt a qualitative approach that includes focus groups and informal discussions with school staff to explore what may be causing absence issues with students. Reviewers do not usually check whether the school has a policy on student attendance, if it has a high level of unexplained or unapproved absences, or if its follow-up processes are adequate and in accordance with DET's policy and guidelines.

Although reviewers may canvass these issues through their discussions with schools, DET does not require this level of verification. This is because DET's school review program is primarily intended to examine school performance outcomes and how they can be improved, instead of compliance with DET policy.

School census

Each year, DET conducts a census of government schools to count the number of students who satisfy eligibility[12] and attendance criteria and who, therefore, can be funded through school global budgets.

To satisfy attendance criteria, students must have 80 per cent attendance up to census day, but those with absences can count as attending if the school approves them. For this purpose, acceptance by the school of the reason for absence is sufficient to be regarded as "approved". Students with irregular attendance can also be counted as long as the school can demonstrate that it is actively following-up with these students and trying to re-engage them. Students who have not attended in the current year for reasons other than illness, or who average more than one day's unapproved absence per week, are not permitted to be included in census counts.

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[11] The terms of reference contain an outline of the scope of the review, the methodology for the review (including the anticipated duration) and the format of the recommendations that should be contained within the report that emanates from the review.

[12] They generally have to be Australian residents aged between 4 years and 8 months and under 18 years at 1 January in the relevant school year.

Enrolment audits

Each year, DET audits one-third of census returns[13]. Auditors examine attendance records to verify eligibility of students, and look for evidence that the school is working to engage those students with irregular attendance. If auditors fail to see evidence of follow-up by schools for students with irregular attendance, or lack of evidence for approval of absences, then they can remove students from the census count and this can result in a reduction in funding.

The enrolment audit process, although primarily designed to ensure that school census counts are accurate is, therefore, a surrogate monitoring process of school compliance with attendance policies.

We found that enrolment auditors do not examine the basis upon which schools approve absences. That is, they only verify that approved absences are supported by evidence that the school has accepted the explanation for the absence (e.g. by verifying that there are records of notes for absences). Enrolment auditors do not assess whether the school's decision to approve a particular absence is appropriate by examining the excuses offered by parents in those instances and whether they meet the criteria for a "reasonable excuse" as defined by the Community Services Act. As a result, it is possible for some students to be counted in the census return even though the reasons for absence may not qualify as a "reasonable excuse" according to the Act.

Playground at a Victorian government primary school.

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[13] Since 2002, schools have been selected for audit using a risk-based targeting approach that results in some schools chosen at random and others on the basis of inconsistencies detected in previous year's census returns. Prior to this, all Victorian government schools were subject to enrolment audits annually.

3.2.3 Monitoring of non-government schools

The RSB has a responsibility to monitor the arrangements and operation of each registered non-government school to ensure that the continuing registration of those schools is consistent with the requirements of the Education Act.

In discharging this responsibility, the RSB:

- monitors registered schools to gauge ongoing compliance with registration requirements by annual return of information and by cyclic review of schools – generally once every 6 years
- cancels the registration of schools that do not comply with the requirements for registration, having regard to standard of instruction, registration of teachers, buildings, minimum enrolments, safety of students, or regulations relevant to registration.

Registered non-government schools are required to submit an annual return to the RSB each year that contains a range of information relating to the compliance with registration requirements. The RSB does not receive regular student absence data from registered schools.

We found that registered non-government schools are not required by the RSB to:

- develop local policies on student attendance that include procedures for following-up on unexplained absences
- submit data to the RSB each year on student attendance/absence rates within the school
- classify and record reasons for absence using a common data standard prescribed by the RSB[14].

During school reviews, reviewers examine attendance records to verify their accuracy and check with principals to ensure that processes for follow-up are in place. It is unclear, though, on what basis reviewers conclude that identified practices are acceptable given that there are no guidelines issued to non-government schools around acceptable follow-up processes, or procedures for classifying and recording reasons for absences.

We were concerned to note that registered non-government schools are reviewed normally only once every 6 years. We cannot see how the current review model permits the RSB to satisfy itself that registered schools are adequately discharging their duty of care in relation to student attendance, particularly when the RSB does not receive annual attendance/absence data from those schools.

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[14] The RSB requires registered schools to keep records of reasons for absence, but does not articulate data standards to be used by the school for this purpose. Consequently, each school is permitted to devise its own coding process.

The Steering Committee that reviewed the RSB also noted that measures of school achievement, already reported by many non-government schools to their communities, should form part of the RSB's overall monitoring procedures. Specifically, the Steering Committee concluded that: "A strong professional partnership in the development and monitoring of standards will not only provide assurance to the Minister for Education and Training and the community about educational standards but will also encourage further improvement in the standards being achieved in Victorian non-government schools"[15].

3.2.4 Conclusion

Absence measures currently used to classify government schools to a review category are inadequate for identifying those schools with problem attendance management practices.

The school review process is a valuable tool for investigating and developing solutions to school performance problems. However, where attendance issues are part of the scope of a review, diagnostic review methods do not always detect ineffective attendance management practices within schools. The processes for managing student attendance within schools (e.g. timeliness of follow-up of unexplained absences, local monitoring of attendance data and community engagement efforts) can have a significant impact on a school's student absence outcomes. For this reason, we consider that they should be subject to closer and more rigorous examination when exploring how a school can improve its performance in terms of reducing student absence.

The fact that enrolment auditors do not verify that the basis upon which schools approve absences is consistent with departmental policy and the Community Services Act, means that some schools may be receiving funding for some students whose absences should not have been approved.

The lack of any centrally collected absence statistics from registered non-government schools, coupled with the fact that these schools are reviewed only once every 6 years by the RSB, means that present monitoring arrangements do not permit an understanding of the extent to which registered non-government schools are effectively managing student attendance/absences.

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[15] Steering Committee, Review of the Registered Schools (2004), *Review of the Registered Schools Board*, Steering Committee, Review of the Registered Schools Board, Melbourne.

Recommendations

3.   **That DET revise the school review process in relation to issues of student absence, to ensure that:**
     - **unexplained/unapproved absences are taken into account in classifying schools to a review category**
     - **diagnostic reviewers examine the timeliness of school follow-up practices, numbers of unexplained/unapproved absences and the effectiveness of internal school attendance management procedures when examining issues of poor performance on student absence.**

4.   **That DET ensure that the basis upon which student absences are approved by schools for funding purposes is checked by enrolment auditors to assess whether they are consistent with legislation and departmental policy.**

5.   **That the RSB implement reporting by registered non-government schools on student attendance rates in annual returns.**

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4. Is school-level attendance management effective?

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4.1 Are schools identifying and following-up absences?

4.1.1 Criteria

Schools need clear procedures and effective systems to manage student attendance. They should record attendance in class rolls, update central records, follow-up unexplained absences and then amend central records when reasons for absence are identified.

FIGURE 4A: PROCESS FOR IDENTIFYING, RECORDING AND FOLLOWING-UP ON STUDENT ABSENCES
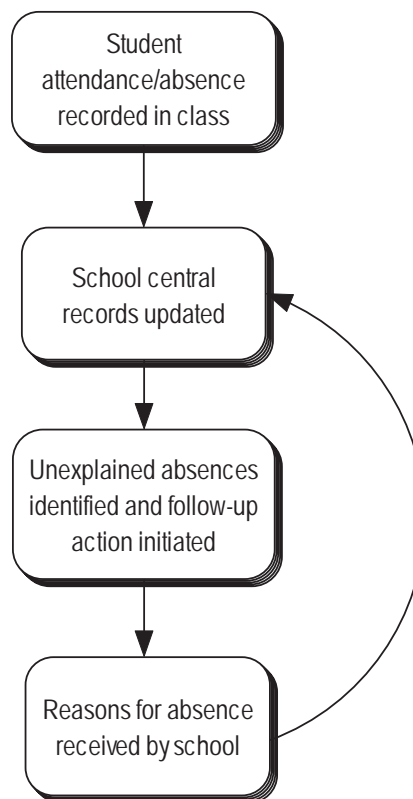
Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

In assessing whether government schools are identifying, recording and following-up student absences effectively, we examined whether they:

- monitor and record student attendance in accordance with departmental policy
- follow-up unsatisfactorily explained absences with parents/guardians in accordance with departmental policy.

4.1.2 Monitoring and recording student attendance

The Department of Education and Training's (DET's) policy requires schools to monitor and record student attendances and absences on at least each half-day. Secondary schools must also monitor and record Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) student attendance at each class as required by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA)[1].

Overall, approximately 96 per cent of government schools are monitoring student attendance on at least each half-day. Eighty-five per cent of secondary schools monitor attendance on a class-by-class basis for Year 7 to 10 students. This latter practice means that these schools have the capacity to monitor fractional truancy, class-skipping and irregular attendance, factors known to be early warning signs of students with attendance problems.

While most secondary schools (93 per cent) monitor class attendance for VCE students, our audit results suggest that a small number of schools (about 19 schools statewide) are not exercising their responsibility in this area. It is unclear how these schools satisfy the VCAA's class attendance requirements.

In the majority of schools across Victoria, classroom teachers are responsible for marking the attendance roll either on each half-day or in each class. We found that around 90 per cent of schools across Victoria use manual processes to mark the roll. In most schools (86 per cent), School Services Officers (SSOs) collate and update central school attendance records. As will be discussed in Part 5 of this report, this process is generally performed manually, and can be resource intensive and time consuming for schools.

4.1.3 Following-up on unexplained absences and unsatisfactory attendance

Schools have a duty to promptly inform parents or guardians of unexplained absences. The *Student Attendance Guidelines* state that parents/guardians should be contacted where a satisfactory explanation is not provided within 5 school days of an absence. This is essential so that schools can be sure that parents are aware of the absence, and so the school can maintain accurate records of the reasons for student absence.

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[1] The *VCE and VCAL Administrative Handbook 2004* requires that all VCE students attend a minimum of 50 hours of class per VCE unit undertaken.

Timely follow-up is also an important preventative measure, and has been shown to be an effective way of reducing absenteeism. In one school that used a Short Messaging Service (SMS) system to alert parents to student absences when an explanation wasn't received by 10 am, unexplained absences fell by 80 per cent in 15 months[2].

In its publication *Keeping Kids at School,* DET has also pointed out that schools can reduce absence by making it harder for students to miss school without being caught. School culture is an important factor in this, including provision of suitable curriculum, good tracking of student absence, quick and consistent follow-up of unexplained absence, cooperation between school and parents, and support for students[3].

Our audit results indicate that 71 per cent of government schools across Victoria make contact with parents or guardians within one week of an unexplained absence. Twenty-nine per cent of government schools take longer than one week, with 21 per cent of schools taking one month or longer. Primary schools were significantly more likely than secondary schools to take longer than one week to contact parents/guardians about unexplained absences.

We examined school attendance records for June 2004 and found that approximately 29 per cent of absences remain unexplained 12 weeks after they occurred. Based on February 2003 enrolment figures, this equates to approximately 10 500 students who were absent on any given day in June and whose reasons for absence remain unexplained 12 weeks later. This result indicates that schools face significant challenges in obtaining and recording explanations for student absences.
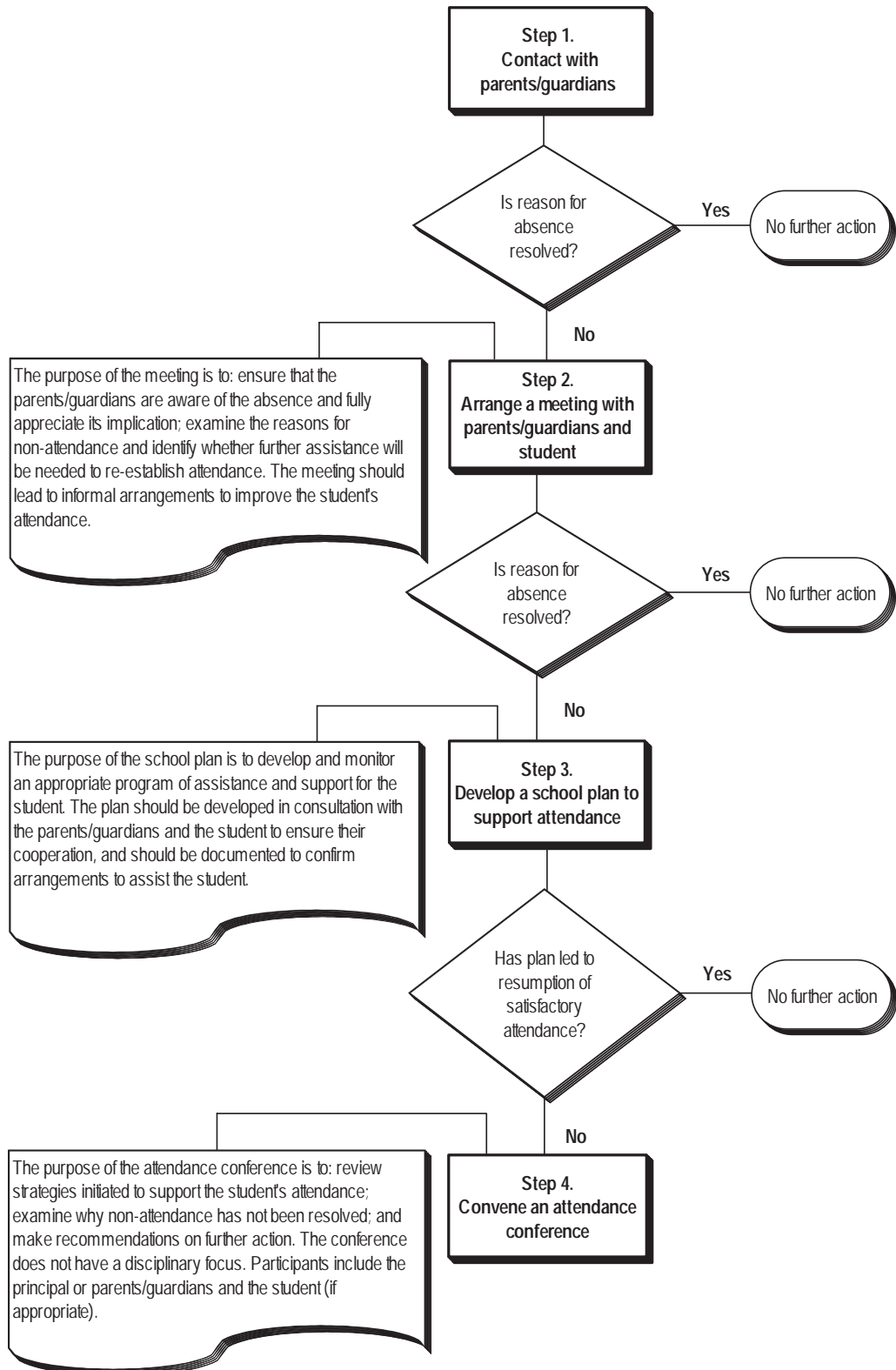
Year-to-date figures we examined confirmed that a large number of absences remain unexplained. On average, 26 per cent of all student absences that occurred between January and September 2004 across Victoria remain unexplained. The rate of unexplained absences in secondary schools (46.3 per cent year-to-date) was significantly higher than both the state average, and that of primary schools (21.7 per cent). This is consistent with DET's own research that shows that school records contain high numbers of unexplained absences. This study showed that when the reasons for absence were identified, the major reasons were health-related (around 58 per cent), and parent choice (around 36 per cent). The incidence of truancy and school refusal was less than one per cent statewide.

The *Student Attendance Guidelines* set out the processes for schools to follow in responding to unsatisfactorily explained absences. These are outlined below.

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[2] A Malbon, *Education Times*, "*Student absenteeism in Gippsland slashed*", Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, June 17, 2004, p. 5.

[3] Department of Education and Training 1999, *Keeping Kids at School: Issues in student attendance*, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, pp. 11, 15.

FIGURE 4B: FOLLOWING-UP ON UNEXPLAINED ABSENCES AND UNSATISFACTORY ATTENDANCE

Step 1. Contact with parents/guardians

Is reason for absence resolved? — Yes → No further action

No

Step 2. Arrange a meeting with parents/guardians and student

The purpose of the meeting is to: ensure that the parents/guardians are aware of the absence and fully appreciate its implication; examine the reasons for non-attendance and identify whether further assistance will be needed to re-establish attendance. The meeting should lead to informal arrangements to improve the student's attendance.

Is reason for absence resolved? — Yes → No further action

No

Step 3. Develop a school plan to support attendance

The purpose of the school plan is to develop and monitor an appropriate program of assistance and support for the student. The plan should be developed in consultation with the parents/guardians and the student to ensure their cooperation, and should be documented to confirm arrangements to assist the student.

Has plan led to resumption of satisfactory attendance? — Yes → No further action

No

Step 4. Convene an attendance conference

The purpose of the attendance conference is to: review strategies initiated to support the student's attendance; examine why non-attendance has not been resolved; and make recommendations on further action. The conference does not have a disciplinary focus. Participants include the principal or parents/guardians and the student (if appropriate).

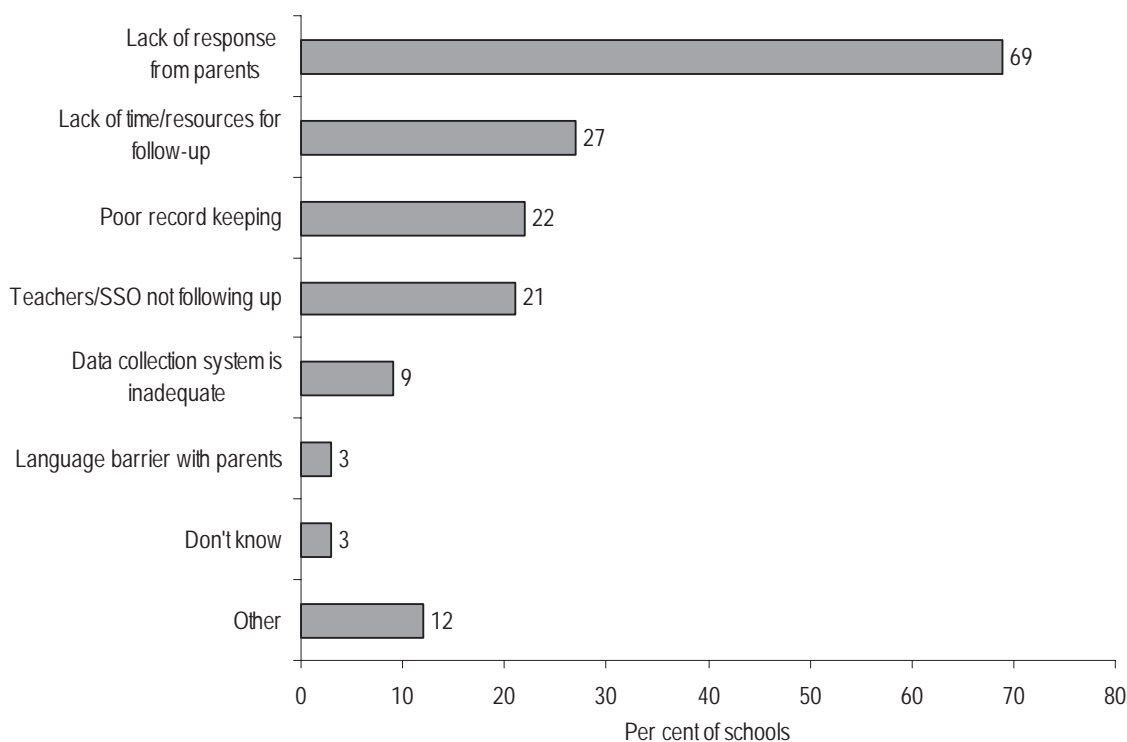*Source:* Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

In a large number of cases, we found that local procedures for following-up on unexplained absences and unsatisfactory attendance contained in school policies did not refer to the procedures established by the *Student Attendance Guidelines*. Some schools were unaware of the guidelines and the follow-up processes they describe. In most cases, we found that procedures included within these policies were vague and did not provide sufficient guidance to school staff in this area.

Many schools preferred to continue attempts to make informal communication with parents when more formal strategies may have been appropriate.

When asked what action is taken if attendance problems remain unresolved after initial attempts at contact, one-third of schools mentioned that they would meet with parents/guardians (the process recommended in the guidelines). Just under half of schools said they would attempt to contact parents either by telephone or letter. However, approximately 5 per cent indicated that they would take no further action at this stage.

If communication with parents did not resolve the attendance problem, schools were taking various steps. More than half either developed a "school plan" (as recommended in the guidelines), or contacted their region/welfare officers or external agencies for help. However, again, about 5 per cent of schools took no further action at this stage.

Schools gave a range of reasons for the high numbers of unexplained absences we found in their records. These included lack of time for follow-up, poor record keeping practices, and failure of staff to follow-up. However, the major reason schools gave was lack of response from parents, as shown in Figure 4C.

FIGURE 4C: WHY DO ABSENCES REMAIN UNEXPLAINED?

Horizontal bar chart, x-axis "Per cent of schools" from 0 to 80:

- Lack of response from parents: 69
- Lack of time/resources for follow-up: 27
- Poor record keeping: 22
- Teachers/SSO not following up: 21
- Data collection system is inadequate: 9
- Language barrier with parents: 3
- Don't know: 3
- Other: 12

Note: Percentages do not add-up to 100 as multiple responses were permitted.
Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

4.1.4 Dealing with unapproved absences

As discussed in Part 2 of this report, some absences from school, such as refusal[4] and truancy[5], are not a "reasonable excuse" for non-attendance under the Community Services Act. Appropriately, DET considers these absences as "unapproved".

DET also permits schools to classify some absences under the category of "parent choice". According to DET's guidelines, absences classified under "parent choice" include those where the:

- parent approved the absence, but did not give a reason
- parent approved the absence, but the reason given was not health-related, extended family holiday or religious cultural observance
- reason given includes visiting relatives, going shopping, missed school bus, family matters, family member ill
- school hasn't told the absence officer the reason for the absence.

[4] Where a student refuses to attend school even in the face of parental persuasion and possible school disciplinary measures.

[5] Persistent, habitual and unexplained absence from school of a child of compulsory school age, which can occur with parental knowledge and sometimes consent.

These reasons do not adequately satisfy the conditions for "reasonable excuse" as defined by the Act, even though DET considers absences classified under this category as "approved".

This means that recorded information in schools does not indicate the full extent to which absences are consistent with the Act.

The fact that "parent choice" absences are considered as approved according to DET's data standard means that most schools are not challenging the validity of reasons for absence given by parents in terms of whether they meet the definition of "reasonable excuse" as set out in the Community Services Act.

When asked what action was taken for unapproved absences (Figure 4D), 37 per cent of schools stated that they were reinforcing the importance of attendance with students/parents. However, the most common response provided by schools was "no action" either due to "limited time/resources" or "that the absences were approved by parents" (43 per cent).

While parents who fail to make sure their children attend school can be penalised under the Community Services Act, none of the audited schools gave this as an option for addressing long-term, unapproved absences.

FIGURE 4D: WHAT ACTION IS TAKEN ON UNAPPROVED ABSENCES?
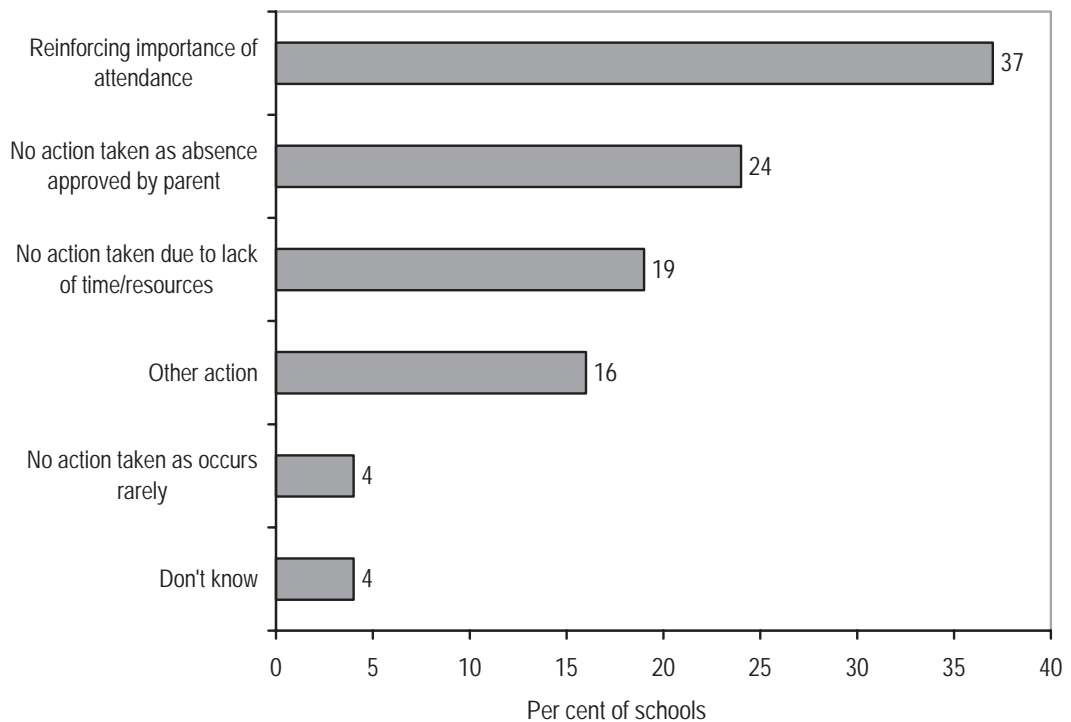
Note: Percentages do not add-up to 100 as multiple responses were permitted.
Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

4.1.5 Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of schools monitor student attendance each day in accordance with DET policy. Many schools exceed DET's minimum standards for monitoring, and monitor attendance on a class-by-class basis. This means that they are well placed to identify the early signs of attendance problems.

The ways in which schools follow-up unexplained absences vary considerably. So, too, do their approaches to dealing with problem attendance. While schools must be flexible in dealing with individual students, it is important that their approaches at different stages of the process are underpinned by a good understanding of the recommended, available options. A small number of schools feel that they have exhausted their options for dealing with students with attendance problems before they have implemented all of the options outlined in the *Student Attendance Guidelines*. Lack of awareness of the guidelines and associated processes for follow-up is a factor in this. Inadequate follow-up of unexplained absences means that parents may not be aware that their children are absent from school, and that some schools are not conveying a clear message to parents that regular attendance matters.

Both schools and parents share responsibility for resolving unexplained absences. Delays or failure to communicate on the part of some parents clearly impact on the school's ability to resolve this issue. Further attention needs to focus on ways that contact with parents can be improved.

Absences due to parent choice are recorded by schools as "approved", even though the underlying reason may not be consistent with the definition of "reasonable excuse" as defined by law. This situation is problematic as it means that schools may not be identifying and following-up invalid excuses offered by parents, and the powers available under legislation to deal with extreme cases of parent-sanctioned unapproved absence appear to be little used.

Recommendations

6. **That DET provide training and assistance to schools to implement timely, effective and efficient follow-up processes.**

7. **That DET, in consultation with schools, develop and implement appropriate strategies to increase parental awareness/engagement on student attendance issues.**

RESPONSE provided by Secretary, Department of Education and Training

The Auditor-General correctly reports that approximately 30 per cent of absences are not explained in school records. In 2003 the department introduced new student absence codes to be used to record the reasons for student absence. For the first time data is now available at the system level on the number of absences for which schools have not been able to obtain reasons for the absence from parents and guardians. The department is now investigating processes to assist schools to improve this. A number of these improvements are discussed in the department's responses to the Auditor-General's recommendations.

4.2 Are school-wide attendance management practices effective?

4.2.1 Criteria

To effectively manage student attendance, schools should:

- have clear local policies on student attendance
- have processes for regularly analysing and reviewing attendance data to identify any action or student support needed
- have processes for effectively engaging with the wider community on attendance issues
- develop, implement and review local strategies to address absenteeism issues.
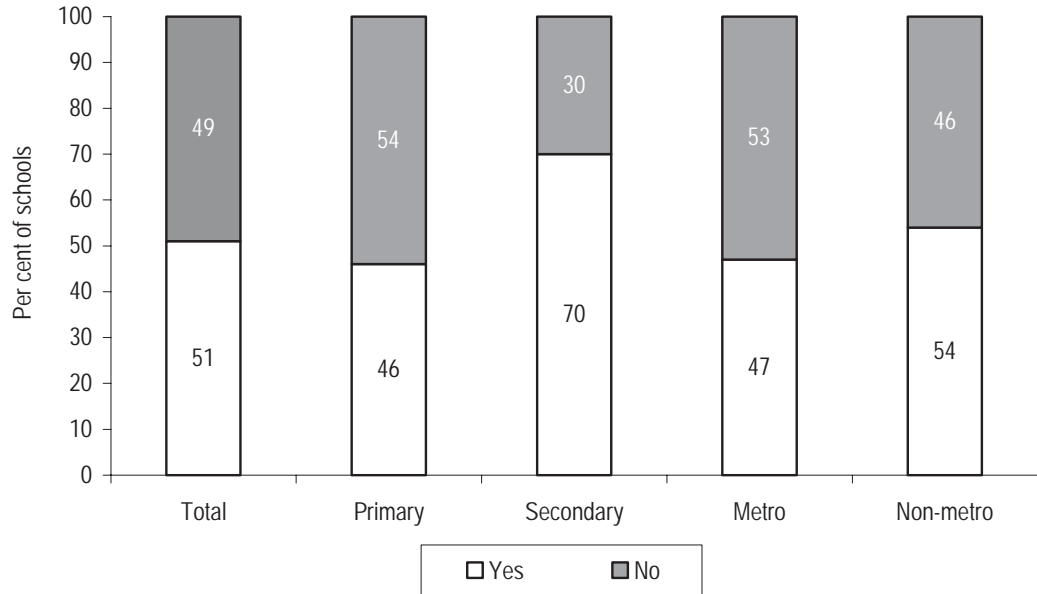
4.2.2 School attendance policies

DET's publication, *Keeping Kids at School,* points out that:

- effective schools with high attendance levels tend to have a clearly stated and agreed policy
- successful schools have clear policies and processes in place for welfare support of individual students.

DET requires each school council to develop local policies for the support and maintenance of student attendance. These policies should include processes and procedures for dealing with the unaccounted and long-term absences of students.

We found that only 51 per cent of government schools have developed local policies on student attendance. Primary schools were significantly less likely than secondary schools to have developed such a policy.

FIGURE 4E: DOES THE SCHOOL HAVE A POLICY ON THE SUPPORT AND MAINTENANCE OF STUDENT ATTENDANCE?

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

As shown in Figure 4F, of those schools which had developed a local attendance policy, it had been endorsed by school council in 77 per cent of cases. Policies in primary schools were more likely to have been endorsed by school council than those in secondary schools.

FIGURE 4F: HAS THE ATTENDANCE POLICY BEEN ENDORSED BY THE SCHOOL COUNCIL?
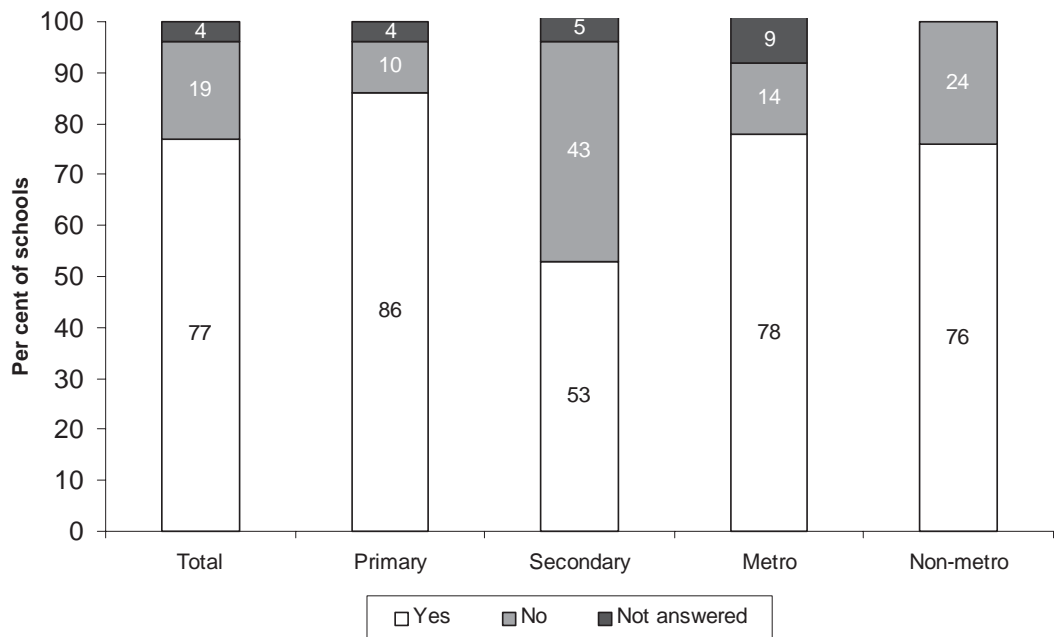
Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

We examined the attendance policies of the schools we audited and found that of those which had a policy, 89 per cent described processes for dealing with unsatisfactorily explained absences, and the responsibilities of parents and of school staff in managing attendance.

In a large number of these cases, though, we found that these processes did not include established follow-up procedures described within the *Student Attendance Guidelines*. Our discussions with school staff suggest that many feel the guidelines lack clarity around what processes should be included within local policies. We observed that some schools are unclear about how to implement some of the steps advocated within the guidelines.

4.2.3 Reviewing attendance data

The *Student Attendance Guidelines* require that attendance records should be carefully and regularly reviewed by schools to identify any action or student support needed.

In its publication, *Keeping Kids at School*, DET highlights the importance of systematic monitoring of student attendance by schools as a means of addressing absenteeism so as to maximise learning opportunities for students. This document examines the issue of improving school attendance and suggests that the collection of attendance/absence information by schools is an essential starting point[6].

Keeping Kids at School reinforces that schools should examine the factors underlying local absenteeism figures, as first impressions created by raw attendance data might not tell the whole story[7]. The document suggests practices which can enhance a school's understanding of local attendance issues:

- A school's initial attendance figures should be scrutinised and adjusted to take account of factors unique to individual schools (e.g. student transfers, absences due to holidays etc.).
- Absence rates can be correlated with student characteristics and academic performance to identify whether there is a tendency for a student with high absence to be part of a homogeneous group[8].
- The reasons for high absences in the school should be explored by investigating patterns of non-attendance.

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[6] Department of Education and Training 1999, *Keeping Kids at School: Issues in student attendance*, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, p. 6.

[7] Ibid.

[8] An example could be children of recently arrived migrants. This can lead to consultation with community leaders to ensure that the importance of school attendance is understood.

- The influence of socio-economic disadvantage within the school should be explored when examining local attendance data. This can help to identify tailored strategies that are appropriate for supporting the attendance of students with particular needs.
- Patterns of class skipping should be investigated as they can indicate the need for more focused curriculum.

Two-thirds of schools across Victoria said that they collate and analyse the reasons for student absences. Of these, just over half report the results to school management[9] at least once every 2-3 months. Ten per cent of schools report to school management once every 4-6 months, and one-third report annually. Secondary schools were more likely than primary schools to report to school management at least once every 2-3 months.

We interviewed members of school management in each of the 120 schools that we audited and asked them to describe the major reasons for student absences at the school. We also examined analysis reports where available to support the reasons we were given. Most schools gave "illness" (95 per cent), "family/extended holidays" (77 per cent) and "parental choice" (30 per cent) as the most common reasons.

However, in almost all cases, this understanding was largely anecdotal or based on raw absence rates. It was not based on analysis of the reasons for student absence.

We also found that schools were not using available data on the number of unexplained absences as a sign of how well their follow-up procedures were working.

As detailed earlier, a significant number of absences remain unexplained in school attendance records. In many instances, schools were surprised and in some cases alarmed to observe the relatively high number of year-to-date unexplained absences that we identified from an examination of their local databases. This suggests that many schools are not using locally available information to assist them to understand and act on reasons for absences.

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[9] School management includes the principal, assistant principal and year-level coordinators.

4.2.4 Engaging with the wider school and the community

Support from the local school community for attendance programs is vital if they are to be effective. Schools and parents need to develop constructive partnerships to meet their mutual responsibilities in this area.

The *Student Attendance Guidelines* encourage schools to set up partnerships with groups within the local school community to effectively manage student attendance.

These stakeholders include:

- *Parents or guardians* who should clearly understand that they must inform the school of the reason for a student's absence. Parents and guardians should also be made aware of how the school follows-up unexplained absences.
- *School councils* which are required to develop local policies on student attendance, and which are accountable to their local communities and the minister for the effectiveness of local attendance programs.
- *School management* (e.g. year-level coordinators, form teachers and principals) who must monitor a student's overall attendance record and take action when that record is of concern.
- *Teachers* who are responsible for monitoring attendance and following-up absences in their classes.
- *External support agencies* that can assist schools in providing appropriate support to students with specific needs.
- *Students* who should clearly understand the school's code of conduct in relation to regular attendance, as well as procedures for informing schools of reasons for absences.

We examined the community engagement processes in the 120 schools we audited to determine how they involve parents and the community in attendance management.

A large number of schools are discussing attendance with staff regularly, reinforcing the importance of attendance with patents and students regularly, and using the services of local community and welfare groups.

However, in two-fifths of schools, community engagement processes are not as strong. These schools are less likely to engage parents on issues of attendance, to use the services of external support agencies, or to regularly discuss attendance issues with staff and students.

Only 19 per cent of schools were reporting to school councils on the status of student attendance at least every 4-6 months.

4.2.5 Implementing local initiatives

Our audit results suggest that most schools (81 per cent) have implemented some form of strategy to reduce absenteeism. Secondary schools (94 per cent) are significantly more likely than primary schools (77 per cent) to have done so. In the vast majority of all schools (97 per cent), these strategies were developed locally by the school.

As shown in Figure 4G, implemented strategies consisted mainly of initiatives to improve parental awareness and engagement, improve follow-up of absences, raise student awareness and engagement, and increase the relevance of the curriculum.

FIGURE 4G: WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE SCHOOL USED TO MINIMISE ABSENTEEISM?

Strategy	Per cent of schools
Mention absence in newsletter	39
Increased follow-up with parents	38
Absent days noted on student reports	35
Increase student awareness of importance of attendance	26
Improve curriculum/teaching practices	26
Follow-up phone calls with parents	24
Meetings with parents/information sessions	20
Awards to classes/students with least absences	19
Counselling provided to student	16
School policy developed and distributed to staff and parents	14
Enhanced procedures for recording absences	14
Utilise resources of the department	12
Keeping teachers informed about absence levels	9
Generally raise awareness/promote a culture of school attendance	7
Clear expectations/consequences established for long-term absences	7
Regular focus at assembly/home group meetings	6
Appointed dedicated staff resource for absenteeism	5
Regular evaluation of policy/procedures for absenteeism	5
Provide information on absenteeism on website	2
Strong relationship developed between teacher/student/welfare officer	2
Other	11

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

We found that two-thirds of schools developed their strategy after analysing absence data. However, most analyses looked at trends in overall school absence rates, based on data in the school level and annual reports. As a result, the analyses weren't informed by data on *why* students were absent.

Only a few schools had targeted strategies in place that were informed by a detailed analysis of the underlying reasons for the absence of particular subgroups of students.

4.2.6 Evaluating local initiatives

Around two-thirds of schools that had implemented strategies, had used analyses of absence data to evaluate and demonstrate their effectiveness. Secondary schools (88 per cent) were significantly more likely than primary schools (60 per cent) to have evidence of the effectiveness of absenteeism reduction strategies.

Of these schools, 67 per cent pointed to a downward trend in absence rates published in School Level Reports. However, 21 per cent of schools provided us with evidence that was primarily anecdotal in nature, while 18 per cent pointed to improved procedures and processes for monitoring student attendance and reasons for absence.

Few schools analyse the impact of attendance improvement initiatives on target groups defined by year-level, gender, specific socioeconomic characteristics or cultural factors. Lack of time, and skills in analysis and in using CASES21, appear to be significant factors contributing to this situation across schools.

4.2.7 Conclusion

A significant number of school councils have not discharged their responsibility to develop local policies on student attendance. This suggests that school leadership teams need to better engage school councils on the issue of student attendance. Increasing the awareness and involvement of school councils is an important first step in building wider community involvement in attendance management.

Most schools have only an anecdotal understanding of the reasons for student absences. Although many schools analyse and report on student attendance to school management regularly, these analyses do not usually involve a rigorous examination of CASES21 data on both unexplained absences and the reasons for absence in the school. Lack of skills in using CASES21 is a factor in this.

Most strategies implemented by schools to reduce absenteeism have a broad focus and are not usually underpinned by an analysis of the reasons for absence. We consider that for as long as schools remain unable to fully understand the root causes underlying specific absenteeism issues, they run the risk of implementing what may be blunt strategies, whose effectiveness cannot be assured.

Recommendations

8. That school management teams, in conjunction with their councils, effectively discharge their responsibility to develop local policies on student attendance as required, and that DET monitor school compliance in this area.

9. That DET clearly identify and communicate to schools the processes and procedures for managing unexplained and long-term absences that should be included within school policies.

10. That DET provide professional development to schools to improve proficiency in utilising the reporting capability of CASES21 to inform targeted strategy development and review.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

5. Are systems for managing attendance data in schools effective?

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5.1   Criteria

The Computerised Administrative System Environment in Schools (CASES21) is the primary information management system used within government schools in Victoria[1]. It is used to manage all of the major financial and administrative functions within each school, and for ultimately recording and storing student attendance/absence data in most instances. CASES21 has many features to assist schools in managing student attendance, including electronic roll-marking (ERM) capabilities. It stores the attendance records of all students in the school, including reasons for any absences.

While schools do not have to use the ERM capabilities of CASES21, those schools who use manual roll-marking processes have to ensure that attendance/absence data is entered into CASES21 so that annual reports on student absences can be produced and distributed to the central office of the Department of Education and Training (DET). Schools who use third-party ERM products to maintain their attendance records are not required to re-input this information into CASES21. These schools can submit their annual summary absence reports to DET by keying-in figures into a web-based form. Our audit results suggest that approximately 10 per cent of government schools across Victoria use some form of ERM.

In examining the way CASES21 is used to manage attendance data, we considered whether:

* data standards are appropriate, and result in the collection of meaningful information on the reasons for student absences
* CASES21 helps schools to monitor and record student attendance efficiently.

5.2   Are data standards appropriate?

Student absence codes included in CASES21 are DET's official data standards for recording and classifying the reasons for student absences. Initially, CASES had only 7 absence codes. New absence codes were implemented as schools began moving to the current CASES21 system in July 2000.

Since 2000, as schools have been progressively moving to the CASES21 system, DET has reviewed and modified absence codes and guidelines for their application. This has been based on feedback from schools and on analysis of the ways that schools have been using the system.

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[1] Registered non-government schools are not required to use CASES21. Attendance monitoring systems used by registered schools must comply with requirements established by the Registered Schools Board.

In 2002, a revised set of codes expanded on the original 7, increasing the total number to 48. These codes, and the accompanying guidelines for applying them, were further updated in 2003. The revised set of codes include multiple health-related codes, late arrival/early departure codes, curriculum related codes and others. These are shown in Figure 5A.

FIGURE 5A: CASES21 STUDENT ABSENCE CODES

Code	Description
Late arrival/early departure	
111	Late arrival at school
112	Early departure from school
113	Late arrival unexplained
114	Early departure unexplained
116	Late arrival to class
117	Early leaver from class
118	Late class unexplained
Educational	
600	Educational
601	Group activity
602	Community service
603	Duty student
604	Excursion
605	Special event
606	Camp
607	Other educational activity
608	TAFE
609	Work experience
610	School production
611	Sports
612	Study leave
802	Exempt
School decision	
901	Industrial action
902	Facility damage
903	Weather
904	Staff meeting

FIGURE 5A: CASES21 STUDENT ABSENCE CODES - continued

Code	Descriptor
Health related	
200	Medical
201	Illness
202	Accident
203	Counselling
204	Sick bay
205	Medical appointment
206	Hospitalised
207	Quarantine
209	Dentist
210	Medical/welfare
211	Bereavement
Unapproved absence	
208	Refusal
300	Truancy
500	Unexplained
Discipline	
400	Suspension - in-school/internal
401	Suspension - external
900	School choice
Exited/transferred	
700	Flags
701	Exit
702	Transferred
Parental choice	
800	Parent choice
804	Extended family holidays
805	Religious /cultural observance

Source: Department of Education and Training.

CASES21 absence codes fall within 2 broad categories:

- Codes for absences that are counted by DET in published absence statistics/benchmarks. These include health-related, unapproved absences (i.e. refusal, truancy, unexplained), some disciplinary categories (i.e. suspension, school choice) and parental choice (i.e. parent approved, family holidays, religious/cultural observance).

- Codes for curriculum-related absences which are not counted when determining absence rates for each school (e.g. sport days, excursions camps etc.).

We identified a number of issues with the CASES21 data definitions that impact on the usefulness and consistency of the data:

- *Overlap in codes* - Not all of the current absence codes are mutually exclusive. For example, it is possible to classify a specific health-related absence as "medical", "illness", "medical appointment", "hospitalised", "dentist" or "medical/welfare" - depending on the information available. This does not promote consistent use of the codes by schools and, therefore, limits their use for inclusion in broader analyses across multiple schools.

- *"Parental choice"*- The "parental choice" code does not clearly identify why a student is absent - other than the reason being approved by the parent. As we noted in Part 4 of this report, while DET and schools generally treat absences under this code as "approved", it is possible for the actual reason (which is normally unknown to the school) to be inconsistent with the definition of "reasonable excuse" as defined by the Community Services Act. Such absences should not be accepted without question by the school.

- *Distinguishing approved/unapproved absences* – DET's data standards cannot adequately distinguish "approved" from "unapproved" absences. For example, unapproved absences due to "school withdrawal" (where the parent keeps the child away from school for reasons related to the needs of the parent) are not separately identified by CASES21 absence codes. We found that schools normally classify these absences under "parental choice". This situation is problematic given that DET and schools generally treat this category of absences as "approved".

Schools we audited also noted the lack of clarity in DET's current data standards. Approximately one-third did not believe that that the current standards promote consistency in how reasons for absence are classified and recorded across schools.

5.2.1 Does CASES21 help schools record and monitor student attendance efficiently?

Although CASES21 was not designed primarily as an ERM solution for schools, it has the capability to record either half-day day or period absences directly into the system.

Teachers can generate electronic class attendance records and then mark students who are present or absent directly on-screen. However, as CASES21 operates over the school's administrative system (which, for security reasons, is inaccessible to teachers in the classroom), these potential efficiencies are largely unachievable.

As a result, schools employ a number of approaches to facilitate electronic capture of attendance data. This can include:

- using CASES21 to generate lists with barcodes next to the name of each absent student, which are then scanned by office staff to update attendance records electronically
- using other proprietary ERM products.

We found that among those schools which mark the roll manually, attendance data in most instances (90 per cent) is transferred into CASES21 using manual data handling processes. CASES21 does not have the facility to import data from other electronic roll-marking products. While schools which use these products are not required to re-enter this information into CASES21, DET recognises that such a facility would have advantages for schools.

Managing student attendance data can consume significant resources in schools. We found that School Services Officers (SSOs), on average, devote approximately 17 per cent of their time to these activities. Time devoted by SSOs to these tasks is significantly greater at secondary schools (approximately 38 per cent) compared with primary schools (12 per cent).

DET, in its review of ERM practices in government schools in 2003, has previously noted these issues[2]. This review recommended the development of an interface between CASES21 and third-party ERM products[3] to reduce the reliance of schools upon manual data handling processes, and noted an earlier finding that the "lack of appropriate compatibility between CASES21 and external roll marking products is a source of inefficiency and reduced effectiveness particularly from a central data reporting perspective"[4].

We were advised that this action has been logged for future implementation in CASES21 but has not yet received priority for development.

We found that many schools are not using CASES21 to simplify and streamline their management of attendance records. When we reviewed processes within schools to maintain student attendance records, we found that 68 per cent maintain their attendance records both in hard-copy and on CASES21. Only one-quarter of schools (26 per cent) used CASES21 alone.

We were advised that DET is currently overseeing the implementation of a pilot project that is exploring initiatives to address some of these issues. Details of this project are outlined in Figure 5B.

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[2] Department of Education and Training 2003, *Electronic Roll Marking Stage 2 Report*, Department of Education and Training, Victoria, p. 36.

[3] Ibid, p. 31.

[4] Ibid, p. 1.

FIGURE 5B: THE "STUDENTS AT THE CENTRE" PILOT PROJECT

DET is currently developing an integrated management system for schools. This system, currently known as "The Ultranet", aims to better support teaching and learning, curriculum delivery and the management of knowledge in Victorian schools.

The Ultranet system is a web-based facility that is integrated with CASES21 and accessible to teachers in the classroom as well as by students and parents. It is currently being developed and tested in 12 primary and secondary schools to provide further information to implement the solution in a range of school settings.

Improved attendance monitoring capabilities are an important feature of the system, which promises to significantly streamline associated practices in schools. These features currently include:

- An "attendance module" accessible by teachers from their laptops who must mark the roll within each class.

- Wireless connectivity which means that laptops can be moved by teachers with ease from class to class without the need to login again.

- Mandated roll-marking in class means that teachers who do not comply become visible to the head of school.

- Planned student absences from class (including the reasons) must be entered into the system one week beforehand, these are then scrutinised/approved by the head of school.

- At the end of each school day, heads of school get an exception report from the system on student absences providing a timely basis for initiating follow-up procedures.

- Only heads of school and authorised staff can update the student's attendance record once the reason for absence has been identified.

- The ability to run a range of reports that enable the school to quickly develop a comprehensive picture of absentee patterns by, for example, day of week, class, reasons etc. When coupled with other reporting capabilities, the school can develop a richer picture of student involvement in school and a more detailed understanding of the factors that may be affecting a student's performance.

- Parents can access the system from home to view a student's attendance and achievement record as well as up-to-date feedback on the student's progress in the class.

The Ultranet system will be evaluated by DET in late 2005. Early indications suggest that the system has been positively received by those schools involved and is generally seen as an effective tool for facilitating positive change in school/parent culture towards the management of student outcomes.

CASES21 has several features that can assist schools to follow-up and report on absences. For example, it can generate:

- follow-up letters for parents for unexplained absences
- absence reports by classroom teacher for follow-up and verification
- reports for year-level coordinators that can help them monitor the follow-up process
- reports that identify and track explained and unexplained absences, including reasons for absence. These can be summary reports at the school-level, or detailed reports at the student level. They can cover either a specific day or wider time frame.

Schools we visited were not fully exploiting this capability. In some instances, school staff lacked the necessary knowledge to run various CASES21 reports to extract the required data.

5.2.2 Conclusion

DET's data standards for classifying and recording reasons for student absences need further work. Absence codes included in CASES21 are not all mutually exclusive and do not adequately distinguish between approved and unapproved absences. This situation undermines the collection of consistent and accurate information on the reasons for student absences by schools.

CASES21 has many useful features for managing student attendance. However, teachers cannot utilise its ERM features in the classroom and there is no facility to import data from third-party ERM products. This creates significant barriers for schools in making the most of its potential. As a result, schools have become overly dependent on manual, time consuming and less efficient methods for recording attendance data. The excessive time spent on data entry could be better spent on value adding tasks such as following-up with parents on reasons for absence.

In many schools, limited user skills also prevent full utilisation of the potential benefits of CASES21.

Recommendations

11. **That DET undertake a review of the adequacy of existing absence codes and revise them where appropriate so that they:**
    - **are mutually exclusive**
    - **adequately identify all major forms of absenteeism**
    - **distinguish between approved/unapproved absences.**

12. **That DET take action to enable the import of data from third-party ERM products into CASES21 so as to reduce the reliance of schools on inefficient, manual data handling processes.**

13. **That DET review the current arrangements for the delivery of training/professional development to schools on the utilisation of CASES21 for managing student absenteeism, and take action to improve the skill-level of users in this area.**

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6. Are statewide and regional attendance initiatives soundly based?

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

6.1   Criteria

To be effective, initiatives to reduce absenteeism should be informed by a careful analysis and understanding of the factors that lead to students being away from school. While trend data on the incidence of student absence is useful, any analysis should also examine the reasons *why* students are absent. In this way, schools can identify both the main forms of absenteeism and the most appropriate strategies to reduce them. This information is particularly important, as different forms of absenteeism need different types of interventions.

In determining whether statewide and regional attendance initiatives are soundly based, we assessed:

- whether data analysed by the Department of Education and Training (DET) and regional offices provide an understanding of the incidence of student absence as well as the reasons for student absence
- whether the available data enables regions to support schools in implementing strategies to reduce absenteeism
- whether statewide and regional initiatives to improve attendance are evidence-based.

6.2   Collation and analysis of data for government schools

6.2.1 Statewide data gathering and reporting

Statewide and regional data on student absence in Victoria is critical in informing strategy development. For this purpose, the central office of DET collates, analyses and produces a range of reports on student absence each year. These reports are aggregated to give both a statewide and regional picture, and are also produced at the individual school level.

DET collects data on student absence from schools each year. As described in Part 5 of this report, published absence statistics consists of non-curriculum related absence rates for each year-level in the school[1]. This data describes the average number of absent days per student across the entire school and for each year-level only. It does not identify why students are absent.

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[1] Non-curriculum absence rates are absences that are not related to aspects of the school curriculum such as sports days and camps. They also include health-related absences; unapproved absences such as truancy, refusal and unexplained absences; suspension; and absences due to parental choice.

The central office of DET analyses this data and publishes reports at a statewide, regional and school level. These include:

- *School Management Benchmarks.* This report, which is publicly available, incorporates a wide range of data collected from government schools. The information presented has been summarised across all schools to develop annual statewide benchmarks in key areas of school operations, including student absence. The benchmarks allow schools to compare their own performance in these areas with that of other Victorian schools, after allowing for the socio-economic composition and language background of their student populations.

- *School Level Report.* This report is produced for each school annually and contains a range of school-level performance data with comparisons to state benchmarks. This data includes school performance on English, mathematics, enrolments, parent/staff feedback and student absence. The School Level Report is normally included within each school's annual report.

- *Regional Summary of School Performance Data.* This report is prepared for regional offices annually, and is based on individual school-level performance data that has been aggregated up to the regional level. As with the School Level Report, it contains information drawn from a range of datasets, including results on student absence.

- *School Performance Data.* This report, first produced for regional offices in 2004, contains detailed school level performance data for all schools within the region, including data on average student absence rates by year-level for each school.

- *School Network Report.* Each region has a number of school networks, which usually correspond to schools that fall within a particular local government area. Each year, the School Network Report presents local school performance data that has been aggregated up to the school network level.

We found that analyses included in these reports, while comprehensive, focus primarily on examining trends in the number of student absences at a statewide, regional or school level.

They do not provide any information on the underlying reasons for student absences to identify trends in particular forms of absenteeism, or trends in approved/unapproved absences. We found that although schools have recorded reasons for absence in earlier versions of CASES and currently in CASES21, this information has not previously been systematically analysed and reported by the central office of DET[2].

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[2] DET has recently completed a project examining the reasons for absence recorded by 700 schools in 2003.

DET advised that this situation has been influenced partly by the transition of all schools to the newer version of CASES21 and the associated introduction of new absence codes. With the roll-out of CASES21 to all schools now completed[3], DET intends to collect student absence data disaggregated by reason code from these schools at the end of 2004.

6.2.2 Regional analysis

An important role of the regional office is to support the work of schools in maintaining student attendance. This includes giving advice and processing applications for school exemptions and home education. It also includes coordinating school networks on issues of student attendance. School networks are an important forum for sharing information on useful strategies and best practices for managing student attendance.

DET has 9 regional offices across Victoria - 4 metropolitan regions and 5 non-metropolitan regions. We reviewed the activities of 2 regions - Gippsland Region and Western Metropolitan Region.

Feedback we received from the regional offices we visited suggests that DET's reports, in particular the school network reports, are used extensively to promote a broader sense of responsibility among schools for the achievement outcomes, and further training and employment destinations of students within the region.

Feedback suggests that regions see the reported data as a valuable tool for triggering discussions with schools and school networks about the causes of absenteeism. This data, and the discussions they generate, are seen as an important precursor to developing local strategies to improve student attendance. An example of the sort of additional analysis of student absence undertaken by regions is outlined in Figure 6A.

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[3] The final school migrated to CASES21 in August 2004 so all schools which use CASES21 for their student absence recording are now using a common code set.

FIGURE 6A: REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF ABSENCE DATA

The Gippsland Region exemplifies the kind of additional analyses undertaken by regions to support schools. Specific examples of further analyses conducted by the region are summarised below:

- For secondary schools, both raw absence rates and the per cent contribution of each school to regional absence results are examined. As schools with small student numbers may have widely fluctuating absence rates (because of the small base upon which the school-average is constructed), this analysis provides more of a context to the raw absence statistics generated by schools and reported by DET.

- Year 11 and 12 absence rates are examined as a means of tracking the status of VCE attendance across secondary schools.

- Three-year trend data for each secondary college is compared with statewide benchmarks and Like School Groups (LSG) in Gippsland. The results produced by the region highlight the importance of conducting further analyses of results received from central office. For example, trend results for some secondary colleges appear consistently below state benchmarks, however, are higher when compared with equivalent LSG benchmarks.

- Secondary school absence rates are compared with those of corresponding feeder primary schools. This provides an additional context for interpreting and understanding results within secondary colleges. For example, if absence rates in feeder schools are low but increase dramatically in the target secondary college, attention is then focused upon understanding the reasons why this occurs.

- Schools with low and high absence rates are compared as a precursor to investigating the underlying causes of differences and identifying areas requiring action.

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

We found that regions help schools to better understand their own local attendance data and then challenge them (if needed) to put local strategies in place to improve student attendance.

School accountability for achieving targeted improvements is established though School Compacts. School Compacts were introduced in 2003 to provide a school-level accountability statement that indicates the outcomes and targets that a school expects to achieve for specific government-funded initiatives. The compacts contain school performance targets for a range of student outcomes. Student absence targets are also included for those schools receiving funding under the Middle Years initiatives. Each compact is developed by the school and signed-off by the principal, school council president and regional director.

School achievements against targets contained in the compact may form part of the principal's performance plan. Regions we visited regarded this as an effective mechanism for reinforcing and promoting accountability within schools. This approach supports DET's school review process which examines individual school performance against both stated school goals and DET's policy objectives as described in the school charter. Senior education officers from each region also review school annual reports and can identify schools with attendance issues for follow-up.

While the regions we reviewed considered DET reports to be useful, the lack of information on the reasons for student absences was regarded as an impediment to better understanding the causes of absenteeism issues in schools.

6.3   Statewide initiatives

DET has developed a range of initiatives in recent years aimed at reducing absenteeism and improving student attendance. These include the Managed Individual Pathways Program, initiatives under the broad banner of Innovation and Excellence in the Middle Years and a number of student wellbeing programs.

Before describing these strategies, we outline the critical findings of the Middle Years Research and Development Project (MYRAD), completed in 2001. This project recognised the importance of regular attendance at school to effective learning, and its findings are the basis for more recent initiatives.

6.3.1 Middle Years Research and Development Project

The MYRAD project developed, evaluated and refined a research-driven approach to the improvement of student learning outcomes in the middle years of schooling (Years 5-9).

This project recognised that regular attendance at school is an important precursor to achieving effective learning outcomes for all students. Results from the MYRAD project provide a foundation for the development of initiatives designed to achieve greater connectedness between student and school.

The MYRAD project established that there should be[4]:

- more focused, in-depth and more student-centred learning
- better coordination of the transition between primary and the middle years of schooling
- an emphasis on students being taught by a small team of teachers with whom they can have continued, regular contact
- focused team planning among these teachers
- specialist arrangements for excellence in particular areas of learning (music, sport or vocational education)
- increased used of information technology to access new and powerful ways of learning
- support for those who fall behind
- better links between home and school
- liaison with outside organisations concerned with the support of young people.

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[4] Department of Education and Training 2003, *Electronic Roll Marking: Stage 2 Report*, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, p. 5.

DET has developed a range of strategies in recent years whose aims include reducing absenteeism and improving student attendance. These initiatives are described below.

6.3.2 Managed Individual Pathways

The Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) program was launched in 2001. The program funds schools so that they can individually manage a Year 10 to 12 student's transition from school to employment, or from school to training and/or further education. The program is particularly for students considered to be at risk of not continuing school or going on to training. Support offered by schools includes literacy and numeracy support, and the development of the other basic skills required for work.

The program was evaluated in its first year, but it was too early for the evaluation results to be conclusive. While we were informed that a further evaluation commissioned by DET has shown a degree of success in meeting its overarching objectives, we did not receive any information about the specific impact the program has had on student attendance.

6.3.3 Innovation and Excellence in the Middle Years initiative

The Innovation and Excellence in the Middle Years initiative has the following 4 elements:

- The *Middle Years Reform Program* started in 2001. It aims to improve Years 5-9 literacy levels, and increase participation and school attendance by students in those years. It also aims to improve the Years 5-9 curriculum.
- *Restart* commenced in 2002. It aims to improve the literacy of Year 7 students with (or at risk of) inadequate literacy.
- The *Schools for Innovation and Excellence* initiative started in 2002-03. It aims to advance student learning in Years 5-9 by providing schools with the opportunity to develop innovative approaches and programs in the middle years.
- The *Access to Excellence Program* started in 2002-03. It aims to improve literacy, numeracy, attendance and retention rates of students in Years 7-10.

Each of these initiatives aims to increase students' skills, and their sense of connection to their school.

6.3.4 Student wellbeing

The following initiatives aim to improve student wellbeing:

- *School retention initiative.* This 2-stage initiative aims to have young people under 15 who are at high risk of dropping out of school (or who have dropped out), continue at school. The first stage comprises 3 pilot projects to investigate how best to encourage these young people to stay at school. In the second, the Centre for Adolescent Health (with the Youth Research Centre and the Centre for Youth Drug Studies) will write best practice guidelines for schools. The initiative also aims to improve regularity of school attendance.

- *The Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools.* DET developed this framework in 1999 to help schools, teachers and student support staff improve student welfare and offer students curriculum support. The framework describes how schools can create a supportive environment that builds a student's sense of belonging, and explains how to help students with particular problems.

- *The School Focused Youth Service.* This started in 1998 as part of the Victorian Government's response to the recommendations of the Suicide Prevention Task Force. It is a joint initiative of DET and the Department of Human Services, with the Association of Independent Schools Victoria and the Catholic Education Office. The service is for young people aged 10 to 18 in government, Catholic and independent schools. It works with education, health and welfare organisations to increase young people's physical, mental and social-emotional wellbeing.

Students studying together.

6.3.5 Evaluation

We found that these strategies are largely underpinned, or influenced, by findings from the MYRAD project. That is, they are mainly designed to encourage improved student outcomes by fostering stronger connections between students and school. Methods used to achieve this often call for innovative and adaptive approaches to developing and delivering the school curriculum. They also aim to support student learning by taking into account the needs and aspirations of all students. In this way, they directly address one of the major causes of absenteeism.

DET has evaluated some of these initiatives, which show a degree of success in meeting the needs of students. However, we did not see any information about the impact that they have had on student attendance.

6.4   Regional strategies

Regional offices can play an important part in developing wider strategies that may be beyond the resources of an individual school.

The regions we examined had developed and implemented local strategies that were generally underpinned by sound research, and informed by available data and discussions with the schools to better understand local absenteeism issues.

Both regions we reviewed recognise and actively promote the importance of effective record keeping and prompt follow-up of absences by schools as fundamental aspects of sound attendance management. They also arrange professional development for school staff and emphasise the importance of engaging with the wider community.

Gippsland Region's attendance strategy was developed based on an assessment of the status of absenteeism in the region using data produced both centrally and by the region, including consultation with schools. A summary of the strategy is presented in Figure 6B.

FIGURE 6B: "IT'S NOT OK TO BE AWAY" - GIPPSLAND REGION ATTENDANCE STRATEGY

Implementation of the strategy commenced in 2004 using a multi-layered strategic approach that links with other related DET initiatives such as Early Years programs, Middle Years initiatives and student wellbeing initiatives.

Specific strategies included:

- a media campaign in term 1, 2004 covering print, radio and TV

- the establishment of a regional "Attendance Week" coinciding with the media campaign

- collaboration with local primary/secondary schools and community organisations to adopt the slogan *"It's Not OK to be Away"*

- consistent communications emphasising that attendance is a community issue – not just an issue for schools

- development of a regional Attendance Support Kit for use within schools that included:

  - parent and student information brochures

  - posters

  - Power Point presentations for schools and school councils

  - whole-school planning documents such as sample policies, case studies, improvement frameworks, teacher information, surveys, and some best practice ideas and strategies

  - information on the role of teachers.

The strategy also involved obtaining buy-in for the attendance support package from local community organisations, focused training for school personnel, consultations with parents through representative groups and collaboration with school networks, and to reduce variation across the region in relation to record keeping practices.
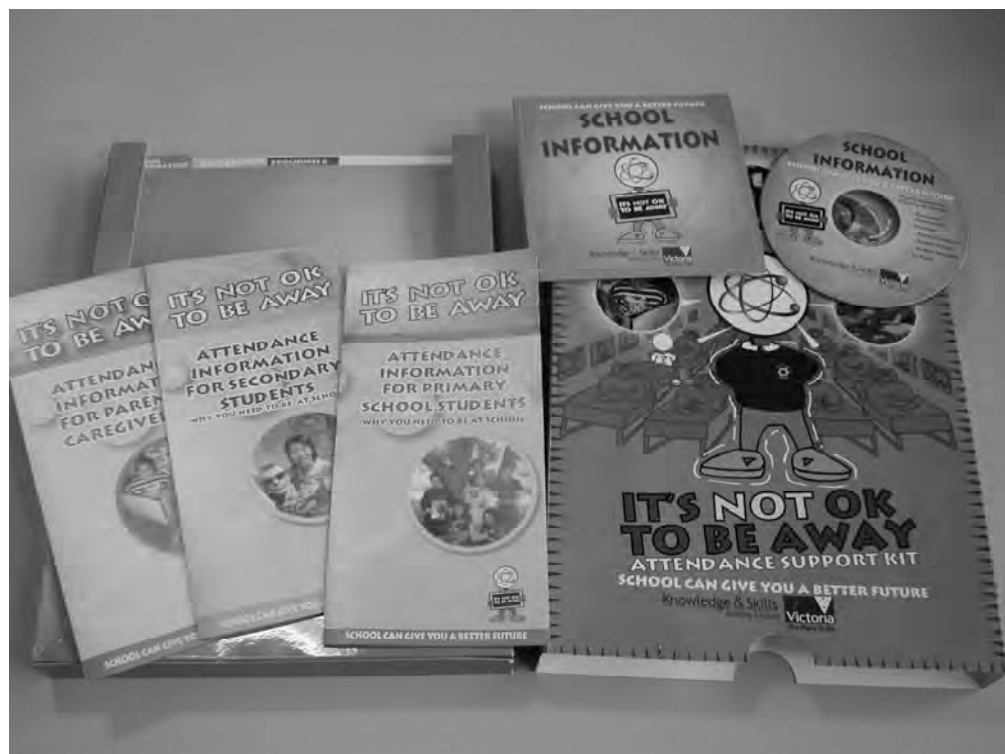
Attendance Support Kit distributed to schools in the Gippsland Region.
(Supplied courtesy of Gippsland Regional Office, Department of Education and Training.)

The Western Metropolitan Region's Truancy Reduction Pilot Project aims to build sustainable school programs and practices so that at-risk students will stay at school. To do this, the project has built partnerships between school, young people, families and the community. The project also aims to demonstrate what works in responding to young people who are at-risk. Details of the project are described in Figure 6C.

FIGURE 6C: WESTERN METROPOLITAN REGION TRUANCY REDUCTION PILOT PROJECT

The Truancy Reduction Pilot Project was established in 5 schools in the Werribee/Hoppers Crossing area in 2003. The project targets young people aged between 10-14 years who exhibit patterns of infrequent and irregular school attendance. Irregular attendance was defined as students who, in the previous 6 months, have had a total of 5 days absent from school which has not been explained to the school's satisfaction.

The project aims to:

- improve the connectedness of students at risk of truancy within each school

- strengthen the ability of each participating school to re-engage the target group

- build the capacity of participating schools to meet the needs of the target group by the development of partnerships between school, the target group and their families

- develop strong prevention, early intervention and intervention programs in partnership with the local community consistent with a whole-school response to welfare issues.

The project is overseen by the DET Western Metropolitan Region and the Multi Service Intervention Response Team (MIRT) initiative. The MIRT has been developed in partnership with DET, the Department of Human Services and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Western Metropolitan Region, Crime Prevention Victoria, and the Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute.

The MIRT, and associated steering committee, aim to provide a timely and informed regional response to high risk students who are in danger of being alienated or have been alienated from school. The target group of MIRT is students who present with complex needs, including issues of poor attendance, truancy and/or refusal, which cross service system boundaries and who have progressed through a staged response at the school level (consistent with that described within the *Student Attendance Guidelines* for responding to unsatisfactorily explained absences).

6.4.5 Conclusion

DET produces a comprehensive range of reports on student absence that are used extensively by regions as a basis for working collaboratively with schools to identify issues and improve school performance.

However, while these reports describe trends in the overall incidence of student absence, they do not give insight into the underlying reasons. Nor do they identify the level of specific forms of absenteeism or levels of unexplained and unapproved absences. As this information is crucial for the purpose of developing targeted strategies, its omission from DET reports represents a gap in DET's analysis and reporting framework that should be addressed.

DET has developed a number of initiatives in recent years that should improve student attendance. Some directly address student absenteeism, and others address the underlying causes, (for example, by improving student performance, enhancing student wellbeing and taking innovative approaches to delivering the school curriculum).

Notwithstanding the recent initiatives, the lack of any formal evaluation of the impact that these initiatives have had on student attendance means that we are unable to conclude if these strategies have been effective from this perspective. Given the upward trend in statewide absence rates observed in recent years, we believe that DET should direct efforts to examining the impact of its initiatives on attendance as a priority.

Recommendations

14. **That DET collate and analyse data on the reasons for student absences recorded by government schools, so as to report on the incidence of specific forms of absenteeism, including levels of unexplained and unapproved student absences.**

15. **That DET evaluate and report on the effectiveness of its implemented initiatives with respect to student attendance.**

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(a)   This report is included in Part 3.2, Human Services section of the *Report on Ministerial Portfolios,* June 2001.

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